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THE DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GENERAL FACULTY COUNCIL  
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BY

LEROY ALBERT ANGLE, B.A.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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ST. STEPHEN'S THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

We, the undersigned, hereby certify that we have read and recommend to the General Faculty Council for acceptance a thesis entitled THE DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM, submitted by Leroy Albert Angle, B.A. in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Divinity.

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THE DOCTRINE OF  
CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

by

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September, 1963





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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- (1) Its Growth and Development (Pre-Christian Baptism)
- (2) The Institution of Christian Baptism
- (3) Baptism in the New Testament
- (4) What is a Sacrament?
- (5) Baptism as a Means of God's Grace
- (6) Baptism and the New Life in Christ
- (7) Baptism and Church Membership
- (8) Baptism of Infants and of Adults
- (9) The Significance of the Method of Baptism
- (10) Conclusion





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PREFACE

There are two approaches which one might adopt in writing a thesis: One is to have a preconceived conclusion which one sets out to support or prove convincingly if possible. The second is more of an exploratory approach, where the author begins his enquiry without knowing where it will lead him and what the final position will be.

The latter approach is the one which I have utilized. I began with a desire to clarify in my own mind at least, and to set down as clearly as possible, the issues involved in the discrepancy of practice with regard to Christian baptism and come to an informed position one way or the other in the controversy over the subject. I had no idea how far afield in Christian theology this quest would lead me, but adequate understanding of the sacrament of baptism has involved me in the theology of God, the Church, the sacraments, grace, and Christian salvation--very nearly across the whole spectrum of Christian theology.

It has been a very enlightening and rewarding study. It is a study which is going on with various degrees of intensity all across the ecumenical church today. And it is a study which is by no means completed. There are some considerations relevant to the doctrine of Christian baptism which I have not touched; some which I have considered only briefly and generally are no doubt worthy of more detailed study. However, I am satisfied that I have sufficiently



covered the major issues relevant to the topic and have outlined the general conclusions which I believe are most theologically sound. This enquiry has fitted me more adequately for the position which God has graciously given me in his church and his purposes. I hope it will also benefit others to whom I have the privilege to minister.





## Chapter 1:

### Its Growth and Development: (Pre-Christian Baptism)

Baptism is older than Christianity. John the Baptist came preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptized in the River Jordan. John the Baptist, however, was not the first to baptize. The question then arises, "What is behind the baptism of John?"

The origins of the practice of baptism stem back to very primitive beginnings. In prehistoric times, even though the germ theory of disease and modern concepts of cleanliness were completely unknown, people bathed in water for pleasure and for health. To animistic peoples who thought and explained what we consider to be natural events in terms of spirits, the cleansing and health-giving powers of the water spirit were soon extended beyond their legitimate limits. Practices of various forms of ceremonial washings or lustrations to ward off evil spirits which were thought to be awaiting a chance to possess one's body emerged. Not only disease, but such things as danger, bad luck, or death, were superstitiously considered to be at least partially under the influence or control of the water spirit.

Such primitive practices of ceremonial lustrations are common to all ancient religions. Examples may be found in the Old Testament. Some of these are purifications after childbirth (Leviticus 12), after contact with the dead (Leviticus 11:24,25), for leprosy (Leviticus 13, 14), and after sexual relations (1 Samuel 21: 1-4). Other classic examples are such passages as





Leviticus 15, Numbers 19, and Ezekiel 36:25. These practices are also referred to in such New Testament passages as Mark 7:4, Hebrews 6:2, and 9:10.

Although water is the most common agent used in such primitive practices, other media were also often utilized among various tribes and groups of peoples. These include blood, smoke, incense, and fire; while analogous rites at birth or puberty, frequently in connection with the name-giving ceremony, are tatuing, circumcision, and other bodily mutilations." (1).

All of these early practices resulted from a tenuous grasp of the benefits of bodily cleanliness and an animistic understanding of the basis of disease, death, and other ill-fortune. They had no moral significance and no real value outside that of bodily cleanliness, and can be classed as magic or superstition.

Moving beyond the field of superstition, the Jews also used baptism as a means of receiving proselytes into the Jewish faith and community. Commonly there were three steps to initiating proselytes into Judaism--circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice. This procedure, however, was often altered to suit the conditions or to suit the taste of the various Rabbinical schools. G.F. Moore says that "In the case of a woman there was no circumcision, and after the destruction of the temple no offering." (2) He continues that the

(1) Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Volume 2, Page 368

(2) Judaism, Volume 1, Page 331-2



offering of a sacrifice was:

"Not one of the conditions of becoming a proselyte, but only a condition precedent to the experience of one of the rights which belong to him as a proselyte, namely, participation in a sacrificial meal. As soon as he was circumcised and baptized, he was in full standing in the religious community, having all the legal rights and powers and being subject to all the obligations of the Jew by birth. He had 'entered into the covenant'". (3)

What, then, is the relation between circumcision and baptism as initiatory rites? Regarding the inter-relationships of these rites there is no small amount of confusion. Some Rabbis insisted that circumcision was the only necessary rite; and others that baptism was the only necessary rite. (4) In actuality a few were received into Judaism without either rite, but the usual practice was to use both.

How baptism came to be used as an initiatory rite is uncertain. Kraeling reasons that:

"The probability is that it developed from the tebilah, a ritual bath prescribed for lay people under a variety of circumstances and for the high priest under special circumstances, to remove levitical impurity. The candidate for admission to Judaism, not having observed laws of ritual purity as a pagan, might well be expected to perform such a rite upon admission." (5)

G.F. Moore has two pertinent comments to make upon this reasoning:

(1) The idea of purification "really or symbolically, from the uncleanness in which the whole life of the heathen was passed. . . . seems to be nowhere explicitly

- (3) Judaism, Volume 1, Page 332
- (4) Judaism, Volume 3, Page 110
- (5) John the Baptist, Page 101





propounded by Jewish teachers in the early centuries. the rite itself differs fundamentally from such baths of purification in that the presence of official witnesses is required." (6)

(2) "In the whole ritual there is no suggestion that baptism was a real or symbolic purification;. . . . It is essentially an initiatory rite, with a forward and not a backward look." (7)

We can therefore conclude that the avenues by which baptism came to be used as an initiatory rite in Judaism have yet to be conclusively determined. The fact that it was used as such is unquestionable.

As an initiatory rite, baptism also had a good deal of moral significance. The motives and moral standards of behavior of any man seeking entry into the Jewish covenant were carefully examined before circumcision and baptism were ever considered. In this respect baptism was a mark of moral excellence on the part of the one being, or having been, baptized.

Among the Essene Community the moral purity of a prospective covenanter approaching baptism is very strongly stated:

"He who refuses to enter God's covenant. . . . will not be purified by atonement offerings, and he will not be made clean with the water for impurity; he will not sanctify himself with seas and rivers or be made clean with any water for washing." (8)

(6) Judaism, Volume 1, Page 332-3

(7) Judaism, Volume 1, Page 334

(8) Manual of Discipline..Millar Burrows--The Dead Sea Scrolls, Page 373





But for him who does enter the covenant and submit:

"His soul to all the statutes of God, his flesh will be cleansed, that he may be sprinkled with water for impurity and sanctify himself with water of cleanness. And he will establish his steps, to walk perfectly in all the ways of God, as he commanded for the appointed times of his testimonies, and not to turn aside to right or left, and not to transgress against one of all his words. Then he will be accepted by pleasing atonements before God; and this will be for him a covenant of eternal community." (9)

The Manual of Discipline goes on to say:

"They shall not enter the water in order to touch the sacred food of the holy men, for they will not be cleansed unless they have turned from their evil. For there is something unclean in all who transgress his word." (10)

Here is a definite indication of the concept of baptism of the Essenes. A man is not baptized to be cleansed automatically of his impurity. Baptism is not a magical formula which in itself cleanses one of his moral guilt, "for they will not be cleansed unless they have turned from their evil." (10) Baptism is rather "a covenant of eternal community" for he who has already submitted himself to the statutes of God. And this "covenant of eternal community" can even be broken in such ways as the Manual of Discipline clearly states.

And so baptism comes to be a means, of accepting a person who is willing to submit himself to the statutes of Yahweh into Judaism, and more specifically in the case of the Essene community, into the community. In this way it is significantly different from the ceremonial ablutions of earlier times.

(9) Manual of Discipline, Burrows-Page 373-4

(10) Manual of Discipline, Burrows-Page 377



"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea," (11) and with him came a new understanding of the significance of baptism. There are at least three distinguishing features of the baptism of John:

- (1) Its direct association with repentance,
- (2) Its eschatological background or setting,
- (3) Its application to those who are themselves already Jews.

Let us consider them individually in that order:

John was a fire-and-brimstone preacher, a prophet of the first order. Indeed Jesus gave him the distinguishing tribute, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist." (12) Like the great prophets of the Old Testament, John's message was strongly moralistic. He points to the sins of the Jews themselves and condemns them in no uncertain terms. He crushes the pride and confidence of the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Jewish heritage by saying, "Bear fruit that benefits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." (13)

So John pulled no punches in his ethical teaching. But the forthright bluntness and purity of his ethical

- (11) Matthew-3:1  
(12) Matthew-11:11  
(13) Matthew-3:8,9





teachings also had the added power of the eschatalogical background from which he expounded them. For John lived in the time when Jewish apocalyptic thinking was in its glory. This complex of future hopes and expectations can be seen appearing in the seventh chapter of Daniel and fully expressed in the Book of Revelation.

Essentially it imaginatively expressed the current Jewish hope of a coming Messianic age prior to the final judgement of God. It is based upon the dualistic concept of two worlds--the present evil age, and the age to come when God would rule and peace would reign. This conversion was expected to be a cataclysmic event, preceeded by the coming golden age for the Jewish people, the age of the Messiah. The expanded expectation of the Messianic Age first finds expression in the last verses of the Old Testament:

"Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." (14)

The Jews looked forward to the Messianic age as a day when the chosen people of God would be exalted over all their enemies. They hoped and prayed that it would come soon.

John proclaimed that it would come soon--but it would not be a day for the Jews to look forward to. "Even now

(14) Malachi 4:5,6



the axe is laid at the root of the trees; every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (15)

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (16)

So, according to John, the day of Judgement is upon us, and the basis of that judgement will be morality, not heritage nor membership within the covenant. Therefore, prepare yourselves for the judgement of God -- all of you, Jews included -- by repenting, being baptized, and bearing fruit that befits repentance.

John's baptism, therefore, was based on the precondition of repentance, the post-condition of bearing fruit worthy of repentance and faith in the grace and forgiveness of Yahweh.

Several explanations have been brought forth attempting to account for the origin and significance of John's baptism. One submitted by Leipoldt is that it was intended as a reconstitution, in a new and wider sense, of the people of God, necessitated by the sin of the whole nation. Joachim Jeremias relates it to the baptism of Isreal in the Red Sea and considers it part of the requirement for entry into the Land of Promise which John proclaimed. Others such as F. Reitzenstein and J. Thomas try to explain it in terms of non-Jewish practices and Iranian myths. (17)

(15) Matthew 3:10

(16) Luke 3:17

(17) John the Baptist-Krealing - Page 103-109





Krealing carries out a detailed explanation which makes John's baptism an act of repentance - which it was, - by pre-enacting the inevitable judgement in the river of fire. By so doing the person being baptized expresses repentant submission to God's judgement hoping " to escape from the terrors of a future immersion in the fiery torrent of judgement in the day that was to come." (18)

How close to the truth Krealing is with his association of religious imagery is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. I think that he may be fairly accurate, but would question whether or not all, or any, of his symbolism was in the back of John's mind. I would suspect a much simpler explanation by John, before theologians began to embellish it.

It seems to me, if I may be bold enough to venture an alternative explanation, that John, with his conviction that the day of final judgement was near was also convinced that his fellow countrymen were not in too enviable a position for such judgement. They put their confidence in their lineage from Abraham and their membership in the covenant, rather than in the moral fruits of their lives. The only hope for them was, in the true prophetic tradition, to repent of their ways and return to Yahweh.

But repentance ought to have some visible and tangible manifestation or sign. What better one was available than a moral lustration. The Jews had lustrations for various



kinds of ceremonial uncleanness. The proselyte baptism, as has already been mentioned, had definite moral significance. Allowing John enough originality to put the two together, we come up with a moral lustration for repentance preparing one spiritually for judgement day -- baptism.

To my mind such a simple explanation as this is much more in keeping with the unembellished New Testament record than the extravagant explanations previously mentioned. The baptism of John is not an attempt to reconstitute the people of God, nor to pre-enact one's judgement as if this would help one "to escape from the terrors of future immersion, immersion in the fiery torrents of judgement in the day that was to come." (19) Nor does this explanation have to reach out into the mysterious myths of the religious milieu of the Near East. It is simply a visible expression of the Jewish prophetic faith in the goodness of Yahweh to forgive the truly penitent as he approaches the imminent judgement day.

Biblical foundation for such an interpretation as this may be found in the prophets: Ezekiel says:

"Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will





vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (20)

Also Zechariah, speaking of the day of the Lord's coming, says:

"On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness." (21)

- (20) Ezekiel - 36:22-28  
(21) Zechariah - 13:1





Chapter 2:

The Institution of Christian Baptism:

To adequately consider the Christian sacrament of baptism, one must first investigate and determine as accurately as possible how it came to be instituted as a Christian rite. The most obvious starting point is, of course, the conclusive fact that Jesus himself was baptized by John in the Jordan. Mark writes very simply and plainly:

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." (1)

Matthew and Luke substantiate Mark's record, (2) though Matthew seems to be concerned about the theological implications of this event as he says:

"John would have prevented him, saying 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented." (3)

St. John, on the other hand, omits completely Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and says rather that John proclaimed Jesus' superiority over himself.

"The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John bore witness, 'I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.'" (4)

(1) Mark 1:9

(2) Matthew 3:16, Luke 3:21

(3) Matthew 3:13-15

(4) John 1:29-34



Implicit in this elaborate enhancement of Jesus' superiority over John is the suggestion that Jesus actually was baptized, though the fact is not stated. Such evasion is not a denial of the synoptic writers' statements. It is rather an indication that St. John, even more than Matthew, wished to avoid the seemingly detrimental fact of Jesus' submission to the baptism of John, resulting, no doubt, from the rivalry between Christians and John's disciples.

Beyond the mere fact that John baptized Jesus is the synoptic writers' conviction that this baptism was the significant initial event from which Jesus' ministry eventually sprang. It was at this time that the Holy Ghost descended upon Jesus and a voice coming from heaven said "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

(5) Even more significant, the entire ministry of John is considered to be indivisibly prerequisite to that of Jesus, not only by the Gospel writers, but by Jesus himself. All four Gospels begin with a synopsis of John's activity. Jesus says, "If you are willing to accept it, he (i.e. John) is Elijah who is to come," (6) referring to Malachi's prophecy:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (7)

(5) Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22. (Matthew varies this wording to read, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." 3:17)

(6) Matthew 11:14

(7) Malachi 4:5





That there was a definite and close relationship between John's ministry and the beginning of Jesus' ministry is unquestionable. Equally beyond question is the thesis that a significant tie between the work of these two men was the baptism of Jesus by John.

The fact of Jesus' baptism by John, however, does not adequately account for the institution of Christian baptism, especially when we consider Jesus' own actions in regard to the sacrament. Many scholars believe that Jesus himself did not baptize anyone. Taking into account the two verses in the gospel of John (3:22; 4:1) which state that Jesus did baptize even more disciples than John the Baptist, it must be noted that these verses come at a time when, according to John, Jesus' ministry was concurrent with that of the Baptist. According to the synoptic writers, Jesus' ministry did not begin until after John's imprisonment (Mark 1:14; Matthew 4:12; Luke 3:20).

Does this indicate a period before John the Baptist's arrest during which Jesus baptized either as a disciple of John or concurrently with John? Beasley-Murray takes this position. (8) He draws attention to the fact that the synoptic writers begin Jesus' ministry in Galilee, while John's gospel indicates Jesus went to Galilee only after discerning that some sense of rivalry was developing

(8) Beasley-Murray-Baptism in the New Testament





among the people regarding him and John. (John 4:1,3). In this light, even the evidence of the synoptic gospels does not definitely exclude the possibility of a Judean ministry prior to Jesus' going to Galilee.

If this line of reasoning be true, why do we have the parenthetic insertion, "(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples)"? (John 4:2). Is this some later scribe's attempt to correct a false statement (or what he considered to be such), or is it from John's own hand? If we accept it to be the work of a later scribe, we can ignore it and accept John's testimony that Jesus baptized on its own merits. If we consider it to be John's own writing, we must confess that he certainly has made a weak effort to cover up the false impression that Jesus did baptize which he has so well made previously.

Another difficulty with this verse is the fact that it gives the impression that Jesus baptized in Judea before going to Galilee. But if we take the evidence of the synoptic gospels, he did not choose his disciples until after he got to Galilee--a conclusion which the fact that four of them were fishermen would substantiate. The only other alternative would be that John 4:1-3 indicates a time after Jesus' Galilean ministry when he had returned to Judea--a possibility which neither John nor the synoptics will plausibly allow.



Though I am of the impression that this verse is the work of a later hand, whichever alternative we prefer certainly does not make our problem any less difficult. For in either case we must come to the conclusion that either Jesus did baptize during a period prior to going to Galilee or approved of his disciples doing so, which would necessarily be at a later time. In either case we must ask the further question, Why are the synoptic gospels so silent (and the rest of John's gospel, for that matter) on the subject. It is very unlikely that they were unaware of Jesus' earlier activities for they knew that he had been baptized by John. Does this mean that Jesus abruptly discontinued what was seemingly a very successful baptismal ministry upon his arrival in Galilee or John's arrest? Does this indicate a break with John and a new beginning without baptizing, in which case the synoptic writers considered it unnecessary to mention his earlier life as a pretege of John? Or do we take Beasley-Murray's interpretation that John 4:2 indicates that Jesus did not in fact discontinue his baptismal ministry immediately upon entering Galilee, but continued it either with, or through, his disciples. This seems to me to be putting too much weight on this one very unstable verse.

Even if we can accept this last of what seem to me to be doubtful uncertainties, we still must answer the question, If Jesus baptized at all, either with John or during the early part of his ministry, why did he discontinue the





practice, which he must certainly have done? Even Beasley-Murray admits that he did discontinue baptizing before the end of his ministry, and there is no evidence to the contrary. Regardless of what our answer is to this question, it makes no difference at this point of our consideration. The significant aspect of our endeavor for consideration of baptism as a Christian rite is the conclusion that Jesus did not baptize at all during his ministry, or refrained from doing so some time during his ministry. In the latter case, as much as the former, we must seek for a satisfactory reason for his actions.

Consideration must now be given to the words of the resurrected Christ recorded in Matthew's Gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (9) As Cullmann says, this verse "contains only the demand for Baptism, but does not explain its connection with his person and his work." (10) Such a demand, without explanation, however, would be sufficient if there were adequate evidence to indicate with confidence that these words were actually spoken by the resurrected Christ.

However, Beasley-Murray to the contrary, such is not the case. There is good evidence to show, as Baillie does,

(9) Matthew 28:19

(10) Cullmann--Baptism in the New Testament-Page 9





that baptism by the "Threefold name. . . was not the usage of the very earliest days." (11) This verse is most likely a reflection of the practice of the early church which had developed by the time of Matthew's Gospel, and cannot be attributed to Christ himself.

Therefore, considering that Mark 16:16 is not "an original part of Mark's Gospel," (12) we are faced with the situation that though Jesus was baptized, by John, he ultimately did not continue this practice and seems nowhere to have requested the disciples to do so. Does this mean that Jesus considered baptism unnecessary or unimportant? Or, more seriously still, did he actually come to oppose the Johannine practice? There are those who would answer "Yes" to one or both of these questions.

Yet Baptism appears as a practice of the very earliest Church when on the day of Pentecost, Peter required that those receiving the Holy Spirit must be baptized. (13) How do we account for this immediate acceptance of baptism into the Christian Church? Several alternatives are available:

(1) First of all there are those who would maintain that Christian baptism was instituted by the Apostles entirely on their own authority and initiative, as a reversion to Johannine baptism. This alternative accounts for the main facts as outlined above, but doesn't do

- (11) D.M. Baillie--The Theology of the Sacraments-Page 75-6.  
(12) Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics-Volume 2  
Page 376  
(13) Acts of the Apostles 2:38.



justice to the original disciples' loyalty to the example and teachings of their Lord.

(2) Secondly attempts have been made to explain Christian baptism as an adoption by Paul of Hellenistic practices in first century pagan religions. This alternative also severs all relation to Jesus and even to Johannine or Jewish baptismal practices, and has little Biblical evidence to support it.

(3) Thirdly we have Albert Schweitzer's explanation of Christian baptism in terms of its eschatological significance. He interprets the baptism of John as an eschatological baptism of repentance preparing one for the future baptism of the Holy Spirit by the one that is to come. Christian baptism in its earliest times was, says Schweitzer, "identical with the eschatological sacrament, preparatory to the outpouring of the Spirit and deliverance from the Judgement, introduced by John the Baptist, except that the bestowal of the Spirit is now contemporaneous with the baptism by water, and that baptism take place with the name of Jesus as the expected Messiah." (14)

He goes on to explain that the reason Jesus himself did not baptize is that his presence of itself was sacramental and needed no "special initiation in preparation for the kingdom of God." (15)

This explanation contains much truth and has a good deal of evidence for its support. That John's baptism was

(14) Schweitzer--The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle-Page 236

(15) Ibid-Page 237





associated with the imminent judgement is beyond doubt. That Christian baptism had its basis in the Christian faith of the present Messianic Age, and was associated with the bestowal of the Spirit is equally well supported. Schweitzer's explanation also has the merit of tying Christian baptism to Johannine baptism, while at the same time giving it a distinctly Christian interpretation. He also, interprets Christian baptism directly with Christian faith and teaching, thus making it an integral part of the newborn community, rather than an inheritance, or a reversion to Judaism.

The weakest part of Schweitzer's theory is his explanation of the fact that Jesus did not baptize. His explanation of Jesus walking among the people as the Messiah incognito and being host to thousands at a sacramental Messianic banquet without their being aware of it lacks concrete evidence. It is very strange that the eschatological atmosphere which he claims to be so strong in Jesus' time, is not even understood by Mark. This he, himself, recognizes. (16)

(4) Lastly, we can approach the problem differently as Aulen does. He says:

"The Divine institution cannot be demonstrated on historical grounds. . . . but in the measure that baptism and the Lord's Supper express something which is fundamental in Christianity and thereby prove that they possess an abiding significance for the Christian fellowship, faith perceives them as divinely instituted and at the same time as instituted by Christ. Their abiding foundation and their legitimacy lie in the self-realization of the





Divine will in the work of Christ." (17)

This attempt to dissociate the institution of the sacraments from historical uncertainty and base it on its theological and sacramental consistency with the Christian faith is legitimate. Aulen is correct when he says:

"Even if it cannot be historically and critically demonstrated that these rites were instituted by the historical Jesus, ordained and established by his teaching, it is not thereby proved that they do not belong within the church as its center of spiritual power." (18)

Nevertheless, though it is true that the sacraments must be solidly and fundamentally based in Christian theology, we cannot completely ignore the historical problem as being insignificant.

The problem of the sacrament of baptism being instituted by Christ has been greatly exaggerated by those sceptical of the value of baptism as a sacrament. They have attacked baptism at what seems to be its most vulnerable point--the fact that Jesus did not baptize and apparently did not require his followers to do so. The conclusion that baptism was thereby initiated into the Christian Church on the initiative of the disciples comes under serious questioning when the facts are considered as a whole.

Any attempts to substantiate what Baillie calls the

(17) Aulen-The Faith of the Christian Church-Page 374

(18) Ibid - Page 373



"Dominical" institution of baptism, have been done by a far too negative and apologetic approach. I can agree with Aulen's approach and reasoning, but think that he undermines the historical significance too much because he is afraid that Christian theology cannot uphold the doctrine as an institution of Christ on historical grounds. Schweitzer and Baillie both make attempts to put the institution of the sacrament on sound historical ground, but in my estimation do not altogether succeed. All of these men overlook what seems to me to be the most decisive evidence in support of baptism as a Christian sacrament instituted by Christ himself.

In all the previous considerations inadequate consideration has been given to three important facts:

(1) St. John's assertion that Jesus' disciples did baptize during Jesus' earthly ministry. This verse has previously been brought into question concerning its authenticity and therefore we cannot give it too much significance. It is a verse which must be taken into consideration, however, for if it is true that the disciples baptized during Jesus' ministry, as Beasley-Murray maintains, they doubtlessly did so with his knowledge and approval.

(2) Regardless of whether the disciples baptized during Jesus' ministry or not, I consider it inconceivable that they would not have known his mind on the matter of baptism. As is indicated in the gospels, (19) the general

(19) Mark 2:18, Luke 5:33.





public were comparing and contrasting Jesus' ministry and teaching with that of John. Furthermore they were questioning and challenging Jesus' teaching and practices where they differed from that of John and of orthodox Judaism. Indeed in the synoptic gospels it was Jesus himself who broached the question on the subject of John's baptism. (20) In this atmosphere, it is hardly conceivable that there would be no questions asked by either the public or the disciples themselves regarding the most obvious and fundamental difference between these two men--the fact that John baptized and considered baptism an integral, if not central aspect of his ministry, while Jesus did not even baptize. Therefore it seems to me that we can conclude with reasonably sound assurance, that the disciples knew full well why Jesus did not baptize. It was not some deeply hidden secret from them. They knew whether or not he was opposed to baptism as a rite, or if there was some other reason for his abstaining from its practice.

(3) To continue this line of reasoning, are we making unduly wild and unreasonable deductions to assert that if Jesus had been opposed to baptism, the disciples doubtlessly would not have initiated it as a Christian rite or requirement immediately after his death? Yet this is exactly what happened. It is evident that we must conclude that Jesus was not opposed to baptism, and that he probably had instructed his disciples to recommence the

(20) Matthew 21:25, Mark 11:30, Luke 20:4.





practice after his death, or they would not have done so, at least without any tremor of objection.

If this be true, we must next answer the question, "Why did Jesus not baptize?" To this question, Oscar Cullmann provides the most convincing solution. (21) He observes that at Jesus' baptism when he received the Holy Spirit, the voice spoke to him saying, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." This quotation, he says, comes from the servant songs of Isaiah (specifically Isaiah 42:1) and thereby identifies Jesus the Messiah with the Servant of God in Isaiah. This union of these two great Hebrew concepts at his baptism is the basis or inception of Jesus' messianic consciousness and the role he must take.

(1) Beasley-Murray objects to Cullmann's explanation at this point because he thinks Cullmann oversimplifies the problem by placing too much significance on the event of Jesus' baptism. (22) While I do not think the objections raised by him are as significant as he indicates, they are precautions which must be considered.

No doubt Jesus came to his baptism with a firm knowledge of the Jewish Messianic concepts and had pondered what the Messiah would be like. He may have even considered the relationship of the Messiah-King and the Servant concepts of Isaiah. And therefore, the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism would not be coming to a man with no ideas on the

(21) Cullmann-Baptism in the New Testament-Chapter 1

(22) G.P. Beasley-Murray-Baptism in the New Testament-Page 49-62.



matter of what the Messiah would be like. Therefore Beasley-Murray's objection that it was not necessarily at Jesus' baptism that these two great concepts of Jewish literature were united is well taken--it may have been before.

Granting this, however, I cannot go along with his thesis that Jesus came to his baptism with a Messianic consciousness. That Jesus came to baptism with preconceived concepts of what the Messiah would be like is not only possible, but very probable, if not certain. That he came believing himself to be that Messiah is pure conjecture with no evidence to support it. The significant aspect of the Voice saying to Jesus, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased," is the word "Thou." It is the fact that at his baptism Jesus came to believe himself to be the Messiah that makes the event pivotally important in his life.

Beasley-Murray's contention that Jesus came to his baptism with a Messianic consciousness is as untenable as he says Cullmann's idea is that prior to his baptism Jesus knew that he must die vicariously for the sins of his people.

Admittedly the full implications of the suffering Servant of God reflected in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50, and which Paul develops in Romans 6, are a later development in Jesus' mind. But the fact that it was at his baptism that Jesus came to the conviction that he was the Messiah





for whom the Jews were looking is unquestionable. Thus, for Jesus, his baptism later came to be associated with his death, (23) when his role as Servant would come to its climax and completion. Only after this would "baptism with the Holy Ghost, and with fire," which John the Baptist had proclaimed would be associated with him, come to reality. Therefore, baptism as a Christian rite, as the fulfillment of John's baptism, as baptism with the Holy Ghost, could only take place after Jesus' death.

(2) If we accept Beasley-Murray's interpretation of events, the fact that it was later in Jesus' ministry that he came to this conviction, would also explain his refraining from baptizing later in his ministry. Marking a change in his concept of his role as servant, and his place in God's purpose of salvation, his refraining from baptizing marked a change in his concept of baptism as well.

This is an interpretation of which Beasley-Murray does not approve because of his convictions concerning Jesus' early messianic consciousness, but it is one not altogether foreign to Gospel records. Such a change of emphasis on his work and teaching is indicated in all the Gospels toward the end of his ministry. It is marked in Mark's gospel by the incident on the road to Caesarea Philippi (8:27-33), when his role as Messiah is seemingly taking new shape in his own mind as is reflected in his later teaching regarding his death and coming again in Spirit.

Therefore the association of his death with his baptism

(23) Mark 10:38, Luke 12:50





as reflected in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50 (whether it be early as Cullmann would have it, or later, as Beasley-Murray would have it) explains consistently and adequately the reason for Jesus' abstaining from baptizing, though he intended all the while that following his death and the advent of the Spirit his disciples should baptize.



Chapter 3:

Baptism in the New Testament

Turning to a consideration of baptismal practices found in the New Testament, I begin with the book of Acts. I do so because the only reference to a specific act of baptism in the Gospel records is that of Jesus' baptism to which due consideration has already been given. Further reference will be made to this and other instances where the concept of baptism appears in the Gospels, where they are relevant to the occasion.

As we turn to the book of Acts we find much more fruitful ground for consideration of primitive Christian baptism. Rewarding though the book of Acts is for a study of the theology of baptism, it is none-the-less not without considerable difficulty and confusion. In this book we have no less than nine specific instances where baptism is administered to one or a group of people. (1) From these accounts certain observations become apparent which have direct bearing upon our later considerations of theological controversies surrounding the Sacrament of Baptism: Some of the observations are as follows:

(1) In three of these accounts, baptism is administered following manifestation of the gift of the Holy Spirit. (2)

(11) In two accounts, baptism is administered without any manifestation of the Holy Spirit. (3) In these instances the baptized are subsequently filled with the Spirit by the

- (1) Acts 2:38-41; 8:12; 8:38; 9:18; 10:47,48; 16:15; 16:33;  
18:8; 19:5.  
(2) Acts 2:38-41; 9:18; 10:47,48  
(3) Acts 8:12; 19:5.





"Laying on of hands" of the apostles.

(111) In the remaining four accounts, there is no mention of the Holy Spirit at all in relation to the baptism or the person being baptized. (4) In these instances, belief in Jesus as Lord, and desire to be baptized in his name is the basis of administering baptism. In three of these four cases, the whole household of the believer was baptized at the same time.

From these very simple and basic observations, we can see emerging at least two lines of thought or theology concerning baptism. One is concerning the relation of baptism to the Holy Spirit. In this instance, baptism is administered after manifestation of the Spirit in the life of the individual or individuals or else definite steps are taken to insure that the baptized is filled with the Holy Spirit by a subsequent "laying on of hands." In other words in these five instances it would seem as though the apostles were concerned that every baptized person be a Spirit-filled person.

Set along side of this we have the remaining four instances where baptism is considered to be the rite of entry into the company or fellowship of those who believed that Jesus is Messiah. In other words in these cases baptism had much the same place in the early Church as proselyte baptism and circumcision held in Judaism. The similarities between baptism in these four accounts and (4) Acts 8:38; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8.



proselyte baptism are all the more striking when we realize that in all three cases where the baptized was head of a household, the whole household was baptized.

As both of these concepts will be given individual consideration later, suffice it to say that it is very significant that in the very early Church these two strands of baptismal theology come to the forefront. For these are the two concepts which have come down through Christian history simultaneously and, as we shall see later, emphasis of one to the exclusion of the other is the basis of much conflict and misunderstanding in modern theology of Christian baptism. From these observations we might conclude that in the early Church, both concepts were considered to be legitimate, thus cutting much of the ground from underneath theological controversy on the subject.

Another observation pertinent at this time is the consistent use of the baptismal formula, "in the name of the Lord Jesus." Nowhere in Acts is there mention of the trinitarian formula found in Matthew 28:19 which gives evidence to support the view that baptism by the three-fold name is a later development.

Lastly, consideration must be given to those times when baptism is accompanied by, or supplemented by the "laying on of hands" with which the gift of the Holy Spirit is associated. How do we account for these two instances? G.H.C. Macgregor, says that "The two passages taken together suggest that 'the baptism of the early





church was a conflation of the water-baptism of John with the Christian baptism which was the gift of the Spirit,' and that 'possibly the 'laying on of hands' was the specifically Christian element in baptism.'"

(5) This seems doubtful when we consider that in the case of the Samaritans (chapter 8) the baptism and the "Laying on of hands" were completely separated in terms of time and of those administering the rites.

Cullmann suggests that the division of these two events rather indicates the danger present that the "two effects of Baptism, namely forgiveness of sins, might be regarded simply as a vestige from the past without real connection with the new gift in Christ, the Holy Spirit." (6) Cullmann sees these events as a temporary split between two events which belong together, rather than a conflation of two events originally separate. This seems to me to be the much preferred explanation. However, conclusive evidence in either direction is not available.

When we turn to Paul's letters, we find one very strong emphasis with regard to baptism--the change of life which ought to accompany it. Every time Paul speaks of baptism he does so with the sole intent of emphasizing the fact that this act signifies a death to sin, Adam, and the human differences and striving which result in disunity, bitterness, quarelling, fighting, and war.

(5) Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9, Page 112.

(6) Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament, Page 12.





All these things have no longer power over one's life for one had died to them. As far as they are concerned, the baptized person no longer exists; he is dead.

But death, even to sin, is a negative, devoiding force in life unless it be replaced by something new and positive. This brings us to the other "side of the coin" of baptism in Paul's writings. For Paul does not merely advocate death to sin and all that is associated with it merely for its own sake, nor merely for some personal holiness or righteousness which might thus be achieved. This echoes too much of the Pharisaic attitude which Paul was grateful to have left behind him.

For Paul, death to sin was of positive significance in that it prepared one to "walk in newness of life" (7) with Christ. To walk in newness of life, to "put on Christ", (8) to be "in Christ" was for Paul the goal, the aim, and the purpose of baptism and of life as a whole. For Paul the Christian life, the life of the baptized, ought to be so permeated with the love, the grace, the righteousness, and the Spirit of Christ that all we do and are is because of our relationship to him who is not only the Inspiration but also the Guide and the Goal of life. Baptism is a death with Christ to sin "so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we

(7) Romans 6:4

(8) Galatians 3:27



have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (9).

Moving from the realm of the mystical to that of the practical, what does baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ mean in daily life? One of Paul's main concerns is that it means harmonious unity within the Christian fellowship. (10). Such community harmony, of course, must be based on the firm foundation of changed, renewed individual lives, the basic concern of which is the welfare of one's brother and the honor and glory of the name of Christ. This brings us to the second major concern of Paul for those who have been baptized--that they live lives morally worthy of the name of Christ. Those who are dead to sin ought to have no association with it. In this regard, Paul brings in a rather strange analogy--that of the baptism of Israel in the Red Sea and the cloud. He goes on to say, "Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness." (11) This was because, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance. We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did." (12) The Christian life for the baptized is then at least

(9) Romans 6:4,5

(10) I Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:28

(11) I Corinthians 10:5

(12) I Corinthians 10:7,8.





a life of strict morality and of harmony with one's brothers based on the ideal life exemplified in Christ Jesus.

The basic concepts behind Paul's baptismal theology will be given individual attention more fully at a later time. Mention ought to be made here, however, of the similarity between his concept of baptism as symbolic dying and rising with Christ and the teaching of Jesus himself regarding baptism. Paul's concept of baptism could very well reflect Jesus' concept of baptism as the baptism of death, indicated in his words, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished." (13)

We cannot close this skeletal outline of Paul's concept of baptism without giving some concern to I Corinthians 15:29 where he mentions persons "being baptized on behalf of the dead." Does this verse reflect a widespread practice among the early Church? Does Paul agree with it as a legitimate practice?

To both these questions the answer must be "No." Paul merely mentions this practice, probably carried on by pagan religions, to lend support to his argument in favor of a resurrection. It does not indicate in any way that he himself baptizes "on behalf of the dead," nor agrees with those who do. For a man who could count

(13) Luke 12:50



on the fingers of one hand the number of times he has baptized even the living, (14) it seems inconceivable that he would carry out such a practice, nor approve of anyone else doing so. Although the practice did make some entry into Christianity at a later date, it is altogether foreign to the life and teaching of Paul and the primitive Church.

It is upon this foundation of Scriptural teaching concerning baptism which the Church has built its theologies and practices. And it is to the theology and practice of Christian baptism which we now turn, in an effort to understand in all its fullness the value of this sacrament which has always been a fundamentally integral part of Christian worship.

(14) I Corinthians 1: 14-16



Chapter 4

What is a Sacrament?

To begin our study of the theology of the sacrament of baptism, we must first define the word "sacrament." For it is upon the definition of a sacrament that many of the differences of opinion regarding baptism are based. It is also in a confusion of whether or not baptism is a sacrament at all that some of the debate and inconsistent thinking concerning baptism is rooted. What, then, is a sacrament?

Let us begin by using Albert Schweitzer's definition when he says that "the sacrament consists in something spiritual being mediated by something material." (1) This is about as orthodox a definition as is possible, and sums up the whole question quite well. However, it is packed with meaning and preconceptions which cannot be taken for granted.

How can "something spiritual" be "mediated by something material?" D.M. Baillie begins by saying that it is actually "A Sacramental Universe" in which we live. Because nature is God's creation, it is essentially sacramental in that it does to some extent convey the love and majesty of the Creator. Therefore, any part of nature, such as the rainbow, can have "sacramental" significance for an individual or a group of individuals. He puts it this way:

(1) Schweitzer-The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle-Page 229





"Here we have a recognition that because nature is God's and He is its creator, it lends itself to His use, and He can make its natural elements to speak sacramentally to us; not in the sense of a 'natural theology' which can prove the purpose of God from a mere contemplation of nature, but in the sense that God by his Word can use, and therefore we by our faith can use, natural objects, and some (like the rainbow) more naturally than others, as sacramental expressions of His mercy and faithfulness." (2).

Living as we do in a universe where natural events and objects often convey to the human soul an insight and/or spiritual reality which they of themselves do not possess we come to set apart some objects, or actions which are more suited to convey spiritual reality and truth than others. These are designated as sacraments by the Christian Church.

What the Christian Church designates as a sacrament, however, need not be sacramental in character to all people, or even to all Christians. For some the act of baptism may be only an initiation ceremony accepting an individual into the Christian Church. For others it may take on "magical" qualities where the individual looks upon baptism as an act which in some mysterious way changes the nature of the individual being baptized or changes God's attitude toward the individual. Both of these tendencies have been and are presently great dangers to the Christian concept of a sacrament, in general, and baptism in particular. In this regard, another quotation from Baillie is of importance: "It is only when God

(2) D.M. Baillie-Theology of the Sacraments-Page 45,6.



speaks and awakens human faith that the natural object becomes sacramental." (3) What is sacramental for one individual in a congregation, need not be so at all for the next one.

Awareness of this aspect of the sacrament is of determinative importance when we consider the two misconceptions of the sacrament of baptism: the "ex opere operato" doctrine and the belief that faith is an essential prerequisite to the efficacy of the sacrament. These are the two opposite extremes which have developed through the course of Christian history, neither of which is a true appreciation of the meaning of a sacrament.

The first developed during the Middle Ages and is the doctrine of the Roman Church to the present day. It is based on the rather magical and mechanical idea that baptism confers grace upon the recipient automatically whether he knows he is being baptized and regardless of whether or not the baptism is followed by any manifestation of Christian faith or virtue. The grace bestowed upon an individual at baptism is irresistible. This concept gives rise to such practices as baptism at birth or during birth if there is danger that the child might die. Without baptism there is no removal of the taint of original sin, no membership in the Church, and hence no salvation. (4)

(3) Ibid - Page 47

(4)





During and since the Reformation there has been a strong, almost complete reaction to the "ex opere operato" doctrine by many Protestants; a reaction which has sent them to the opposite extreme. These are they who maintain that baptism is nothing more than a sign and seal of faith and has no significance or efficacy unless the recipient is a mature believer who receives the sacrament in faith. As Lappin explains the Baptist tradition in this respect, "Baptists believe and teach that baptism is the voluntary act of the individual believer who can, for himself, publicly avow his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord." (5)

Baillie warns against this opposite extreme view:

"Does not that suggest that the human part comes first, is prevenient? Would that not be to forget that 'all is of God', that even the faith by which we accept God's grace is itself a gift of God, that it is wrought in us by His grace, and partly by means of the sacraments?"

"Thus instead of saying that sacraments depend on human faith, it seems better to say that sacraments operate through human faith." (6)

Is even this explanation fully to understand the meaning of baptism as a sacrament? At this point we must emphasize more fully the two-fold significance of baptism indicated in the previous chapter. Does not saying "that baptism is the voluntary act of the individual believer who can, for himself, publicly avow his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord" (5) divest baptism of its sacramental character altogether? The concept of baptism as "the

(5) Lappin- Baptists in the Protestant Tradition-Page 66

(6) Op. cit. - Page 53



voluntary act of the individual believer" is not only devoid of any sacramental significance, but does not reflect any consciousness of baptism as an act of acceptance of the individual by the Church, the Body of Christ. Therefore, to restrict baptism to such a stringent concept as this is to remove it from the realm of sacrament and make it nothing more than a profession of faith and an initiatory rite of the Church.

We must recognize that this is a legitimate interpretation of baptism. But we must emphasize that it is only a partial or limited understanding of the significance of baptism and does not take into account at all the sacramental aspects of baptism. It is to emphasize baptism as an initiatory rite to the exclusion of baptism as a means of grace.

The reason that "it is impossible for the question of baptism to be discussed directly between a Catholic and a Baptist" (7) is the fact that the Catholic thinks of baptism primarily in terms of a sacrament, and the Baptist thinks of baptism solely in terms of an initiatory rite and a profession of faith. Until both sides realize that both concepts of baptism are legitimate, there will be "no common ground."

(7) Lappin-Op. Cit.-Page 67



What, then is the relation between a sacrament and faith? How can we avoid both extremes in this regard and maintain the middle road? We have maintained that it is not correct to understand baptism as a rite which of itself bestows irresistible grace or spiritual reality which by nature men cannot achieve; nor is it correct to make baptism dependent upon the prevenient faith of its recipient. Let us begin with Baillie's statement that "instead of saying, that the sacraments depend on human faith, it seems better to say that sacraments operate through human faith." (8) Even this statement seems to assume that human faith is necessary before the sacraments can "operate" in one's life. This is, however, not what Baillie means. He goes on to illustrate what he means in terms of a nurse winning the confidence or faith of a child. He says:

"She sets about her task gently, using various means-- words, gestures, and smiles, and perhaps gifts, all of which convey something of the kindness of her heart. . . . Now that her graciousness, using all these means, has created his faith, she can carry on the good work she has begun." (9)

In this illustration he shows how the grace of God does not only work "through human faith", but also works to "create" the faith that does not exist. This seems to me to be the true relation of the sacraments of grace to faith. Once faith has been born in an individual, once he is a new creation, then the sacraments can and do work

(8) Baillie-Op. Cit.- Page 53

(9) Ibid.-Page 53,54.





through that faith to sustain, strengthen, and nourish it to full maturity. But before any faith exists, before an individual has any awareness of God or any trust in him, God is at work to create that faith in the multitude of ways available to him, one of which often is the sacraments.

"We cannot create our faith in God, we cannot make ourselves trust in him. Our faith must be His gift, His work; yet not in any mechanical sense, whether in the almost deterministic way suggested in some Calvinistic theology or in the mechanical ex opere operato way suggested by some Catholic theology." (10).

Our next consideration must be that of the sacrament as a symbol. In our daily life around us, we constantly use symbols such as money, a flag, a kiss, a handshake, and even words. The symbol is of itself, of little or no real value, and yet because of what it represents, it can have a wealth of meaning and value.

"Its value to us depends not upon what it is, but upon what it stands for or represents." (11).

The symbol, "however simple in form is a complex of tradition, habit and design." (11). Unless we understand and appreciate the "tradition, habit, and design" behind the symbol, we cannot appreciate its value. A ten dollar bill given to a native who knows nothing about trade except by barter would be completely valueless. The flag of a country for someone who does not even recognize it as a flag would have none of the wealth of symbolic value which

(10) Ibid-Page 54

(11) John W. Meister-What Baptism Means-Page 20



it does for a citizen of that country who might be ready to die for what the flag represents to him. The Christian sacraments also have this symbolic nature, which can seem to some to be of absolutely no value, to others to be some kind of superstition, and to others have a wealth of spiritual meaning, significance and value. There is nothing inherent in the nature of a sacrament which makes it inevitably "sacramental" or a means of grace for all people.

If this be true, we must ask the question, does a sacrament "mediate" spiritual reality or "Symbolize" it? While on the surface this seems to be a legitimate question to ask, in the final analysis we must conclude that the sacrament does both symbolize and mediate spiritual reality. This conclusion depends upon an adequate appreciation of the nature of a true symbol. When a mathematician chooses the letter "x" to represent an unknown quantity, it is the unknown quantity. When we give a person money for goods purchased, the money not only symbolizes the value of the goods, it has the value of the goods. A kiss or handshake not only symbolizes love, affection, or good will, it expresses, enhances and transmits those qualities.

In a like manner:

"The sacraments are the self-impartation of divine love in the form of action. . . . Their special significance is not simply historical, but is due to the fact that both in their own way embody the





central content of the Gospel." (12)

The reason that "symbolize" and "mediate" appear to be two entirely different concepts is that we think of that being mediated or symbolized as a material rather than a spiritual reality. The word "house" can symbolize or represent a human dwelling place, but it cannot mediate or transmit that object. In the realm of the emotional and spiritual, however, such is not the case. A kiss not only symbolizes love, but it mediates, enhances, or even creates it. Similarly the sacrament not only symbolizes the grace and love of God available to mankind, it "actualizes the Gospel" (13) and makes it real and active in the life of the recipient.

To what extent does the ability of the sacrament to "actualize the Gospel" in one's life depend on the faith of the recipient? The answer to this question depends upon our understanding of the nature of the grace of God. To this concept we must now give more concentrated attention.

(12) Gustav Aulen-Faith of the Christian Church-Page 370,371

(13) Ibid-Page 371



Chapter 5:

Baptism as a Means of God's Grace

Up until now I have spoken as a "means of grace," as a sacrament which at one and the same time symbolizes and mediates the grace of God. What is this grace of which we speak, and how is baptism a "means" by which it is mediated?

To fully answer this question, we must begin by taking into consideration the nature of the God in whom is our faith and hope. Only as we understand the nature of God as he has revealed himself through the history and prophets of Israel and finally in the person of Jesus Christ can we come to a full appreciation of the Christian doctrine of grace.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition God is understood and experienced as a God who, as Creator and Sustainer of all nature is concerned and actively involved in the common events of time and history. He has created all things for an eternal purpose which he is working to bring to fulfillment. As part of God's creation, man is also involved in God's eternal plan--indeed God's purpose is conceived in terms of his purpose for mankind. Therefore, God is concerned with and involved in man's history, to bring to reality his purpose for man.

What is God's purpose for man? Essentially it is that all mankind might come to know, love and serve God which is salvation and redemption from the greed, the sin, the war and striving, the present evil which is part of man's life



and nature. God's purpose for man is love, peace, joy, happiness, and perfect harmony with oneself, one's fellows, and God himself. God's purpose for man is good--human bliss beyond our wildest imagination.

But this happy condition which is God's purpose for man is the result, not of man's worthiness, but of God's love. Man of himself is sinful. He does not merit any of God's concern nor love. Yet he receives it--not because of any inherent value which he possesses--but because it is God's nature to love his creatures. God is just, righteous, and holy, but he is also a gracious, forgiving, and loving God. Therefore, all of God's dealings with men are the result, not of man's worthiness, but of the inherent nature of God to love and his determined purpose to save mankind from all the evil which presently enslaves him.

Therefore, in a very real sense, everything which God does for and with man is the "free and unmerited favor of God," (1) which is grace. The very fact that God has anything to do with man at all is due to his gracious nature. Ultimately God's love and concern for man prior to any intervention on man's behalf is itself the grace of God. The reason that all of God's activity with men is "grace" is because of the faith that due to his unchanging spontaneous love, all that God does is for the benefit

(1) Shorter-Oxford English Dictionary





or good of man. Though we may not always realize it, nor understand the reason for God's actions, we believe that his motivation is always based upon his limitless love for mankind and beneficent concern for the welfare of mankind.

This theology is, of course, Christian theology, and is the final fruits of centuries of Judeo-Christian development through interpretation of historical and personal events by spiritually sensitive men. The central theme of the grace of God, however, finds numerous expression throughout Biblical literature. When God spoke to Abram he said:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (2)

Here the gracious nature of God finds expression, as it does in the creation stories. Also worthy of note is the fact that this is the first event recorded in the life of Abram regarding his relationship with God. There is no mention made that Abram was a particularly holy or righteous man. There is no human reason given why God chose Abram to bless and make a blessing. The only basis or reason for such action is the gracious will of God so to do.

This aspect of Biblical faith finds even more striking manifestation in the case of Moses. The children of Abraham had ended up in Egypt and were being inhumanly

(2) Genesis 12: 1,2.



treated in Egyptian slave camps. And the Lord said to Moses:

"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, . . . ." (3)

The whole history of Israel and Christianity is one of man's sin and unworthiness being met and conquered by the gracious love of God. And that gracious love of God is always prevenient, i.e. it is always the prerequisite, the first element present in man's relationship to God. Man in his state of sin cannot of his own ability and power establish a vital, living faith in and love for God. Man's very desire for God, his awareness of the presence of God, and his awareness of his need for God are themselves manifestations of the grace of God already active in his life. Christian faith in the gracious and spontaneous love of God for man insists that love is already active in the life of the individual before he has any awareness of it or is conscious of it. The fact that we have any faith in God, and experience of God, is, therefore, not our own achievement, but God's.

The prevenient, spontaneous love of God given freely to unworthy men is seen by the Christian faith to be exemplified supremely and finally in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Here Christian faith sees God

(3) Exodus 3:7,8





giving his only begotten Son in death on a Cross for man's salvation and redemption. This supreme sacrifice was made, to lay bare the terrible sin of man and the limitless love of God which willingly, though grievously, bears that sin and offers man forgiveness and salvation. St. Paul, who rejoiced that this Love met him, the chief of sinners, says:

"While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man--though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." (4)

Such love as this is the basis of our faith and hope.

Concerning the prevenient love and gracious nature of God there is little dispute in Christian tradition. However, differences of opinion appear when we consider what exactly is the true nature of the grace of God as imparted to men, and how, or in what way does God impart grace to men.

It was early recognized by Judaism, that God not only blesses men directly, but also uses men and objects to do so. Consider again God's speaking to Abram. He said, ". . . I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (5) Here we have an example of God promising to bless Abram directly (i.e. without the use of material or human media) and also to use him as a "means" by which he will bless others--"you will be a blessing."

(4) Romans 5:6-8

(5) Genesis 12:2b



The faith that God uses men as "means of grace" is deep-rooted in Judaism. It is the basis of prophetic doctrine and practice as well as the Messianic hope. In Christianity it is the basis again of the Messianic concept and of the whole Christian doctrine of the atonement.

Indeed the concept of God using whole nations as a "means of grace" is rooted in Judaism and finds expression in God's words to Abram quoted above as well as the book of Jonah and some of the prophets. It had great difficulty, however, gaining general acceptance over the concept of Israel as a "blessed" people rather than as a "means" by which others are blessed. In Christianity, however, this concept of God's people as being a "means of grace" is the core and basis of the faith and takes on evangelical fervor. And so in Judeo-Christian tradition human beings as individuals and collectively as the people of God become "means of grace" in the hands of God by which he imparts to men his purpose and his love.

When we come to objects or actions as "means of grace" we do not find any developed theology or doctrine in Judaism, though the essential basis is there. Consider the significance of the rainbow in Genesis 9:12-15, or the burning bush in Exodus 3:2-5. Also the signs of God given to Moses that the people might believe and listen to what Moses has to say to them. (6) These instances, foreshadow the growth of the

(6) Exodus 4:1-9



concept of objects and actions as "means of grace." This concept finds fuller expression in the proselyte circumcision and baptism and practical reality becomes sacramental in the baptism of John the Baptist.

The sacramental intent and purpose are definite from the very beginning in the two dominical sacraments of the Christian Church--baptism and the Lord's Supper. A theology of the sacraments as means of grace, however, like most theological concepts developed rather slowly--a process which continues to the present time.

Through the struggle which orthodox Christianity had with gnosticism and other heresies during and subsequent to the second century, one of the main developments was the growth of the authority of the Church as the body of Christ's followers. To oppose unworthy and heretical abuse of the sacraments, which were the central focus of Christian worship, the Church imposed regulations regarding how they should be administered and who should be qualified to do so. As a result, the Church assumed authority, under a good deal of pressure from heretical influences, to guard and eventually to control, in the name of Christ the "means of grace." Scriptural basis for such authority was found in Matthew 16:19.

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."





Thus developed the concept that the sacrament of baptism rightly belonged under the authority of the Church, and the Church had the power and authority to infer or confer grace upon an individual "ex opere operato" through the sacrament of baptism. Through the centuries prior to the reformation and even to the present day this has remained the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism, although more restrictive regulations and ritualistic embellishments were imposed upon the sacrament as the years passed.

The "ex opere operato" doctrine of grace depends upon the belief that Christ gave authority and power to the Church to confer grace upon an individual. This the Church can do without the knowledge or consent of the individual. Therefore, in the Church of the Middle Ages and the Roman Catholic Church to the present day, the sacrament of baptism is unquestionably a "means of grace." The prevenient and irresistible grace of God is conferred upon an individual at baptism by the authority which Christ gave to the Church.

This concept of grace as an irresistible quality mediated to an individual in an almost materialistic way through baptism will be given further consideration. At this point, however, it is important to emphasize that grace in this case is thought of as an almost materialistic quality which the Church possesses and which is transferred through history by apostolic succession and mediated from the priestly hierarchy of the Church to the laity by baptism.



During and since the Reformation, this concept has been almost entirely rejected by protestants. John Calvin bases his theology of baptism upon the governing theology of divine predestination. By his view all men are predestined even before birth by God and are incapable of altering God's predetermined destiny for each individual. Therefore, Calvin rejected the concept of baptism as having determinitive significance as a means of grace, because for him the grace of God is beyond depraved man's power to control. He also rejected the idea that the Church had any power or authority over the distribution of the grace of God. As a result, for Calvin, baptism was not a "means of grace" at all, but merely a sign and seal of three things:

- (I) "that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed. (7)
- (II) "our mortification in Christ and new life in him." (8)
- (III) "that we are. . . . so united to Christ himself as to be partakers of all his blessings." (9)

Baptism, therefore, is not a "means of grace" but only a sign of that prevenient grace which already has been received by faith. Baptism for Calvin also:

"serves as our confession before men, in as much as it is a mark by which we openly declare that we wish to be ranked among the people of God, by which we testify that we concur with all Christians in the worship of one God, and in one religion; by which, in short, we publicly assert our faith." (10)

- (7) Institutes of the Christian Religion--Book 4-Page 328
- (8) Ibid-Page 331
- (9) Ibid-Page 332
- (10) Ibid-Page 338





It is also evident that baptism considered from this point of view has no significance as a "means of grace."

Luther, who did not share Calvin's views regarding divine predestination emphasized more strongly the necessity of faith as the essential element by which the grace of God is received into one's life. As he says:

"Even so it is not baptism that justifies or benefits anyone, but it is faith in the word of promise, to which baptism is added. This faith justifies, and fulfills that which baptism signifies. For faith is the submersion of the old man and the emerging of the new." (11)

For Luther also baptism is a divine sign or seal of the grace which is received by faith and is not thought of in terms of a "means of grace."

This strong emphasis upon the necessity of faith before grace is effectual through the sacraments is one which must not be overlooked nor lost. It is an emphasis which is essential to any mature theology of the sacraments. It must not be forgotten, however, that the early reformers were theologically at war with the powerful Papal hierarchy and centuries of Christian tradition and theology. Because they were at war with what they believed had developed into a superstitious theology of the sacraments, they naturally, if not necessarily, took the opposite extreme stand to emphasize their viewpoints. Such a radical and strong emphasis in opposition to the accepted and practiced tradition, necessary though it was at that point in history,



forced the reformers (not necessarily consciously nor against their will) into a position which denied any significance to the sacraments as a "means of grace." To admit that the sacraments have significance as a means of grace would have weakened their position regarding the significance of the truth for which they stood. Not to do so, however, necessarily impoverished their concept of the sacraments.

These two opposite extreme concepts of the theology of baptism have come down through the last four centuries of Christian history--the one via Roman Catholicism, the other primarily via the Baptist tradition. The dialectic synthesis of the two has been in process of becoming a reality since that time.

John Knox, the leader of Church reform in Scotland in the latter part of the 16th Century has a more profound appreciation of the significance of the sacraments as a "means of grace." He says:

"And these sacraments (as well of the Old as of the New Testament) were instituted of God, not only to make a visible difference betwix his people, and those that were without his league; but also to exercise the faith of his children; and by participation of the same sacraments, to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise, and of that most blessed conjunction, union, and society, which the Elect have with their head, Christ Jesus. And thus we utterly damn the vanity of those that affirm Sacraments to be nothing else but naked and bare signs. . . . But this liberally and frankly we must confess, that we make a distinction betwix Christ Jesus, in his natural substance, and betwix the elements in the Sacramental signs; so that we will neither worship the signs in place of that which signified by them; neither yet do we despise and interpret them as unprofitable and vain; but do use them with all reverence, examining ourselves





diligently before that so we do." (12)

John Wesley also upholds the doctrine of the sacraments as "means of grace." He says:

"By water then, as a means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again; whence it is also called by the Apostle 'the washing of regeneration'. Our Church therefore ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done. Nor does she ascribe it to the outward washing, but to the inward grace, which, added thereto, makes it a sacrament. Herein a principle of grace is infused, which will not be wholly taken away, unless we quench the Holy Spirit of God by long-continued wickedness." (13)

In their theology, both of these men to whom we in the United Church of Canada are greatly indebted appreciate the element of truth in both traditions of baptism.

Let it be emphatically said that salvation is by faith alone and not by the act of baptism. This is true. But also let us not forget that baptism as a sacrament is not only a sign and seal of justification by faith, but is also a means by which God inspires and nurtures that faith. It is a "means of grace."

In our own century the theology of the sacraments as means of grace has been accepted with renewed appreciation, after two centuries of relapse. Karl Barth, though he severely criticises the "ex opere operato" doctrine of baptism, (14) as well as the concept of baptism as prolongation of the incarnation, (15) and warns against

(12) John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland-  
Volume 2-Pages 268-9.

(13) John Wesley's Works-Volume 10, Page 192

(14) Karl Barth-Church Dogmatics-Doctrine of Reconciliation-  
Volume 1-Pages 695, 6 (footnotes).

(15) Ibid - Volume 2-Page 55 (footnotes)





the danger of lack of Christian responsibility with regard to infant baptism, (16) has a profound appreciation of baptism as a means of grace.

"But baptism is a sacrament of truth and holiness; and it is a sacrament, because it is the sign which directs us to God's revelation of eternal life and declares, not merely the Christian 'myth', but is eternal reality, because it points significantly beyond its own concreteness. Baptism mediates the new creation; it is not itself grace, but from first to last a means of grace." (17)

Gustav Aulen sums up the whole matter of the sacraments as a means of grace in his usual succinct and clear style as follows:

"In the history of Christianity we may note a certain conflict between a mechanical conception of the means of grace and an opposition to the idea of any kind of means. . . . Thus the question can arise: does God work immediately or through means? The fanatical, mystical, and spiritualizing approach holds to the first of these two alternatives. It can easily be explained why this opposition to the means of grace has appeared again and again within Christianity. The cause is that hardened and mechanical conception of the means of grace which has appeared not only within the Church of Rome but also in evangelical theology and which ultimately rests on a conception of God as an extra-mundane being who sits enthroned in exalted majesty and therefore can deal with men only through some intermediary means. But the Christian faith has had good reasons to reject a conception which gains immediacy for the relationship between God and man at the price of surrendering the means of grace. . . . Therefore Christian faith is opposed to a false conception of the means of grace on two fronts: it rejects a mechanical objectivity, and also a spiritualizing dissolution of the means of grace." (18)

There is one other aspect of baptism as a means of

(16) Ibid-Volume 3, Part 2-Pages 517,518

(17) Barth-The Epistle to the Romans-Page 192

(18) Aulen-Faith of the Christian Church-Pages 357-8



grace which must be clarified. That is, what is the nature of the grace which is mediated by the sacraments? This question is raised by Aulen in the phrase quoted above; "does God work immediately or through means?" As was indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the answer to that question must be that God works both immediately, and through means. Just as we cannot eliminate God's use of means in his relationship to men, neither can we restrict the activities of God to "means of grace." Again to quote Aulen:

"When Christian faith regards the sacraments as means of grace, it does not mean that the saving work of divine love could not be realized without sacraments. . . . Faith is not interested in rationing the grace of God. It does not ask whether it is possible to dispense with one or the other of the means of grace; it asks rather what "means" the divine and loving will appears to use in order to realize its purposes. It finds that there is such a treasure in the sacraments as means of grace that the Christian fellowship cannot without detrimental effect neglect their use." (19)

If this is true, the next question which we must ask is, "Is there any essential difference between the grace of God as mediated through "means" and that which is not?" In other words, are the grace of God and the Holy Spirit one and the same thing?

This is a question with which Oscar Hardman in his book The Christian Doctrine of Grace has considerable difficulty. He says that grace is "the grace of the  
(19) Ibid-Page 374





indivisible Trinity and is not to be equated with any one Person of the Trinity." (20) He continues:

"that it equally precludes the particular identification of grace with one Person of the Trinity, since 'grace' must then be held to equal 'the Father' or 'the Son' as well as 'the Holy Ghost'." (21)

He then sums up his position in this regard in these words:

"God the Holy Ghost consorts with the soul of man and brings to bear upon him all the power that belongs to the Personality of God; and it is the influence which He exerts upon the man's soul that is grace, not the Person who exerts the influence." (22)

What cruel injustice to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and that of grace! Small wonder we Christians are often accused of worshipping three gods if this be our interpretation. We must think of the Trinity as "One in three," not "three in One." When we give due appreciation to the fact that the triune God is one God it is meaningless to say that grace is "the grace of the indivisible Trinity and is not to be equated with any one Person of the Trinity." The Trinity is not three persons, but One. Therefore, rather than saying:

"God the Holy Ghost consorts with the soul of man. . . . and it is the influence which He exerts upon the man's soul that is the grace, not the Person who exerts the influence,"

we ought to say "God consorts with the soul of man. . . . and it is the influence which He exerts upon the man's soul

(20) Page 34

(21) Ibid-Pages 34-5

(22) Ibid-Page 36



that is the grace, and is the Holy Ghost." The Holy Ghost is nothing less than the One God himself in communion with the soul of man. Therefore, to equate grace with the Holy Ghost is not to equate it with the Father and the Son as if they were nothing more than that. It is rather to say that the Holy Ghost is the One God manifesting himself directly to the soul of man, and this is grace. What Christian theology has named the Holy Spirit is not the one-third of God which exerts an influence upon man in the form of grace, it is rather the very influence of God upon man. It is the one God in relation to man. And that relationship of God to man of necessity exerts a personal influence.

All of this is a round-about way of saying that grace is one--whether it be communicated directly to man or whether it be mediated by a "means". God has only one thing to give to man and that is himself. When God is present in Spirit, that is grace; when the Spirit of God is absent, there is no grace. "Christian faith knows of no other grace than that which consists in the self-impartation of divine love, or, in other words, that God gives himself." (23) The Holy Spirit and grace, therefore, are none other than the influence of the love of God imparted to man.

Means of grace, therefore, are ways in which the love of God becomes manifest and real in the life of man. "The  
(23) Aulen-Op. Cit.-Page 375



means of grace are understood as a third element which stands between God and man, while in reality these means are nothing less than the modes of God's immediate fellowship with man." (24) D.M. Baillie says that "in the twentieth century there has been a notable development of the conception of grace as what Oman called 'a gracious personal relationship' to be thought of on the analogy of the influence of a father upon his child." (25) Is this not the influence which Christian theology has continually thought of as the Holy Spirit?

Therefore, we must not think of the sacraments as means of grace in the sense that they mediate a grace other than the Holy Spirit. To do so is to conceive of the gift as "something else, and therefore something less, than the self-impartation of divine Love." (26) Baptism as a means of grace is one of the ways in which God actualizes or brings to reality in the life of the individual his divine Spirit of Love. This self-actualization of God in the life of the individual is appropriated by faith, and must result in faith, but is not dependent upon faith. God has already imparted a measure of his prevenient and spontaneous love before faith comes into the picture.

One last comment in this regard might be worthy of mention. That is the fact that baptism need not--indeed

(24) Ibid-Page 357

(25) Baillie-Op. Cit.-Page 52

(26) Aulen-Op. Cit.-Page 378





ought not--to be a "means of grace" for the one being baptized only. The sacrament of baptism is an act of worship in which the whole worshipping congregation participates. We cannot separate baptism from the social and corporate body of the Church. The act of baptism, therefore, might be just as well a means by which God graciously imparts his loving Spirit to any one or any number of the worshipping congregation as to the one or ones being baptized. This aspect of the sacrament of baptism is especially significant in the case of infant baptism, to which fuller consideration will be given.



Chapter 6:

Baptism and the New Life in Christ

Now we must consider the relation and significance of the sacrament of baptism to the central theme of the Christian faith--the salvation of man from sin and death to the new spiritual life of faith in Christ Jesus. These two complementary aspects of the Christian life, expressed throughout the New Testament and Christian history, are expressed by Peter at Pentecost:

"Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38).

In Peter's statement we see the integral relationship of remission of sins, the Holy Spirit, and baptism in the name of Jesus. This theme finds more vivid and complete expression in Paul's letter to the Romans.

For St. Paul the sacrament of baptism embodies in "a nutshell"--in concentrated form--the whole theology of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He outlines in the first five chapters of his letter to the Romans God's free gift of righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus. Then he continues:

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might





be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (1)

As was indicated briefly in Chapter 3, there are two aspects to Paul's conception of salvation symbolized in baptism--death to sin, and newness of life with Christ. This death to sin and newness of life in the Spirit is inextricably bound to the act of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, through which the life of faith is possible. Let us consider more fully what part each of these aspects of the Christian doctrine of salvation have in Christian theology and what significance baptism has in relation to them.

Let us first of all recognize that it is only by the saving act of God in Christ that the life of righteousness is at all available to us. It is because of the grace of God manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, that we have access to the faith which is reckoned to us as righteousness.

"Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God." (2)

This grace which God has made available to us comes through the death of Christ. For it was necessary that Christ

(1) Romans 6:1-11

(2) Romans 5:2



should die, for until he died, he was under the bondage of death and the limitations of this mortal body. It is only as he accepted death and conquered it through faith in God that:

"death no longer had dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God." (3)

Because God has shown man apart from the law in this Christ event that the righteousness of faith is the only response to God's love acceptable to him, and that through the righteousness of faith God has conquered death, man is free from the bondage of law and of death to love and serve God in faith. Except Christ had died and God had revealed him to man as risen again, this possibility of righteousness through faith would never have been available to man. Therefore it is in the death and resurrection of Christ that God's final act and supreme revelation are given to man.

What happened to Christ Jesus in reality--i.e. actual physical death and spiritual resurrection--must happen to man in a symbolic, though none-the-less real, sense. That is he must die to this world if he is to be alive to God in Christ. He must die to the things of the flesh if he is to live to the things of the Spirit, even as Christ had to die to the flesh before he could live in Spirit or as a seed must die before it can spring forth in new life as a plant.

(3) Romans 6:9, 10



This dying to the world, the flesh, or sin is what is symbolized in baptism.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (4)

Does this mean that because we have died to sin through baptism into the death of Christ we are free to live a sinful life because sin no longer has power over us?

Such rationalization! "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (5) Death to sin can mean only one thing--that you no longer have any part in it nor it in you.

When we die to this world, we are gone from it. We are no longer a part of it, nor it of us. So it is with death to sin symbolized in baptism.

But wait! Is this possible in this life? Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that everyone who has been baptized no longer sins! Is it not true that no-one is righteous before God in this world, and that people sin after they have been baptized as well as before? What happens to the person who sins after baptism; is he thereby excluded from the grace of baptism?

These are questions which arose early in Christian history, and which have prompted many and various conclusions and practices in respect to the sacrament of baptism. It is the mechanistic concept of baptism most prevalent in the pre-reformation church, but still a great

(4) Romans 6:3  
(5) Romans 6:2





temptation in all ages, which makes these questions so acutely difficult. If we think of baptism as the means by which our past sins are forgiven and we are rescued from the wrath of a vengeful and angry God, we are likely to do as many did during the fourth century--postpone our baptism as long as we can; preferably until our deathbed. In this way we avoid the risk of having too many sins after baptism for which we have not been forgiven. Or we might postpone our baptism so that we can make the most of this sinful life, to be baptized for forgiveness of sins after we have enjoyed most of the fruits of sin.

"Here a superstitious conception of baptism had disastrous results. Since this misunderstanding of baptism increasingly penetrated the churches, even Christian parents began to postpone the baptism of their children; in particular Christian mothers wished to wait till their children had gone through the storms and stresses of youth before they submitted them to the rigorous moral claims of the Church. They feared lest otherwise they might all too easily forfeit the unique gift of baptismal forgiveness and grace. Sins that had been committed before baptism could not endanger salvation since they would be blotted out in baptism. (It was indeed not without peril to delay the baptism of children too long; considering the high rate of child mortality in the ancient world, the risk was great that they might lose their salvation by suddenly dying unbaptized.) The situation is well illustrated by an occurrence which Augustine records in his Confessions (397/400) I (2). Between 360 and 370, when he was dangerously ill, his pious mother Monica, who had not had him baptized at his birth in 354, asked that he might be baptized, but postponed the baptism again when he suddenly recovered, 'because the guilt contracted by sin after baptism would be still greater and more perilous.' In this connection Augustine tells us he has often heard the saying, 'Let him alone, let him do as he pleases, for he is not yet baptized.'" (6)



It is evident that with this theology and practice of the sacrament of baptism the very existence of baptism as a Christian sacrament was in great peril. As Jeremias points out this practice was evident in the church for only a short time during the fourth century and likely was the result of pagan influx following the nationalization of the church. It does, however, point to a weakness in the theology of baptism which was developing. This weakness resulted from the inability of the theology of baptism to adequately cope with the problem of those sins committed after baptism.

The church met this difficulty by the institution of the sacraments of penance and supreme unction. The sacrament of penance had a rather humble beginning as sin was forgiven only once after baptism. It was the plank after the shipwreck by which one might with considerable effort keep one's head above water. However, this was the beginning and as time passed penance was allowed twice, and finally as often as one desired to receive it.

It was the development and indulgent abuse of the so-called sacrament of penance (and all the other so-called sacraments of the church of the Middle Ages not instituted by Christ) that the reformers most strongly opposed. They were able to do so effectively, however, only because they replaced the previous theology of baptism with what they considered to be a correct one. The reformers attacked





the orthodox theology of baptism at its very roots. They denied that baptism wipes out original and past sins, so that they no longer exist. In accordance with their view of the sacrament, they maintained that forgiveness of sin is a spiritual grace which is made available to us by the death of Christ through faith. Of this grace baptism is not the mediator, but only the sign and seal.

As Luther says:

"This significance of baptism, viz, the dying or drowning of sin, is not fulfilled completely in this life, nay, not until man passes through bodily death also, and utterly decays to dust. The sacrament, or sign, of baptism is quickly over, as we plainly see. But the thing it signifies, viz., the spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, lasts so long as we live, and is completed only in death. Then it is that man is completely sunk in baptism, and that thing comes to pass which baptism signifies." (7)

Again he says:

"It is one thing, then, to say that sins are forgiven, and another thing to say that there is no sin present. After baptism and repentance all sins are forgiven, but sin is still present until death, although because of the forgiveness it does not prevent salvation, provided we strive against it and do not obey it." (8)

Calvin also maintains Luther's point of view:

"Nor is it to be supposed that baptism is bestowed only with reference to the past, so that, in regard to new lapses into which we fall after baptism, we must seek new remedies of expiation in other so-called sacraments, just as if the power of baptism had become obsolete. To this error, in ancient

(7) Works of Martin Luther-Volume 1-Page 57

(8) Works of Martin Luther-Volume 3-Page 35



times, it was owing that some refused to be initiated by baptism until their life was in extreme danger, and they were drawing their last breath, that they might thus obtain pardon for all the past. . . . We ought to consider that at whatever time we are baptized, we are washed and purified once for the whole of life. . . . For though, when once administered, it seems to have passed, it is not abolished by subsequent sins. For the purity of Christ was therein offered to us, always is in force, and is not destroyed by any stain: it wipes and washes away all our defilements." (9)

Thus for these men baptism is the sign signifying the dying of oneself to sin--a spiritual process not completed in baptism, but which continues all through life. The baptism itself, at whatever age it is administered, marks the beginning of one's death to sin, one's initiation into the Christian faith, and as was maintained in the last chapter may to some extent realize them.

However, as has been said, death to sin as symbolized in baptism is not the ultimate purpose nor intention of Christian baptism but merely the prerequisite or the road to the positive side of the Christian life--the new life of the Spirit, also symbolized in baptism. Forgiveness of sin was the intention and purpose of the baptism of John the Baptist which was also a preparation for the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Christian baptism is the fulfillment of John's baptism in that it signifies not



only the remission of sins, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. These two sides of the coin of baptism are inextricably united in Christian theology as is indicated even at Jesus' baptism. As Paul says:

"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . . So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (10)

As in the case of one's death to sin, one's new life of faith, life of the Spirit, is a lifelong transformation which cannot be considered to be completed until death. Of this there is ample verification in Scripture. To choose but one example, Paul says to the Philippians (3:12-15a):

"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature be thus minded;"

The Christian life is not a transformation which is begun, continued, and completed in the act of baptism, but a spiritual pilgrimage which cannot be completed in this life. This pilgrimage will undoubtedly have its smooth and plain places, but it will have its rough, mountainous places as well. Through it all, however, the goal of the Christian life ought ever to be more complete death of oneself to sin

(10) Romans 6:4,5, and 11





and greater sharing of the new life of the Spirit through faith in Christ Jesus. Of this life, baptism is a symbol, an initiation, an expressed intent and a means by which the significance and reality of the spiritual life of faith is appropriated and realized.

Therefore, as it is incorrect to say that one's sins are forgiven or washed away in the act of baptism, so it is incorrect to say that the Holy Spirit is received by baptism. Both of these are symbolically done, and indeed may accompany the act of baptism, but need not necessarily do so. As was seen in Chapter three, the gift of the Holy Spirit can come before or after baptism. Indeed it is more accurate to say, it has been received prior to baptism, it may be more fully experienced and manifest at the time of baptism, and it ought to continue to be more fully received and experienced during the years of Christian life and service subsequent to baptism. Such is in reality the nature of death to sin and newness of life in Christ, which is symbolized, and may be partly, but not completely actualized or realized in baptism itself.



Chapter 7

Baptism and Church Membership

"In the New Testament there is no suggestion that anyone can become a Church member by any other means than baptism, and this practice has been followed in the tradition of the Church generally. Baptism is the rite by which a person becomes a member of the Church. Church members may be defined as those who have been baptized with water in the name of the Triune God either as infants or on profession of faith." (1)

While this statement is no doubt generally true we must be aware of the fact which Johannes Weiss, followed by G.P. Beasley-Murray, points out that the first one hundred and twenty Christians who received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost were not baptized. Weiss also points to Apollos in Acts 18, and the men of Ephesus (Chapter 19) as being examples of men having been received into the church without baptism.

"These narratives show that baptism was not from the outset a necessary mark of the Christian profession; therefore concludes Weiss, we must infer that the author has antedated the situation when he introduces baptism as early as the first Pentecost." (2)

G.P. Beasley-Murray warns against jumping to such a conclusion that reception into the church by baptism is a later development. He says:

"In the mission of the Church to the world no group can be compared with the company of witnesses of the Resurrection, gathered in the name of the Lord on the day of Pentecost in expectation of the fulfilment of the promise. It is a misguided logic that deduces from their experience a primitive

- (1) Record of Proceedings, 20th. General Council, United Church of Canada-Page 473
- (2) Beasley-Murray-Baptism in the New Testament-Page 94





theology of the needlessness of baptism or the significance of any baptism that may have been administered by them. Grant that the mother of Jesus may not have been baptized, that James and his brother and sisters may not have been baptized, that even some others of their company may not have been baptized: their relationship to Christ was unique and their experience of his Spirit was unique; we cannot leap from them to the motley assembly that witnessed their ecstasy at Pentecost and the world without that was to hear their gospel. These had to listen to the good news and respond to it in repentance and faith; and if the Apostolic proclamation included the demand that this repentance and faith be objectified in baptism, and gave promise that God would answer such expression of repentance and faith, neither Pentecost nor Easter morning makes the demand inconsequential and the promise ridiculous." (3)

In the light of what has been said in chapter two, we can say with sound basis that, though there may have been some Christians in early church history who were not baptized, it was the practice of the apostles and primitive church to receive members into the church by baptism. This is a practice which the church in all ages has strictly adhered to. As a result, the twentieth General Council of the United Church of Canada says that:

"Church members may be defined as those who have been baptized with water in the name of the Triune God either as infants or on profession of faith." (4)

Because of the no small amount of controversy at this point we must give fuller consideration to the nature of the Christian Church and the relationship of baptism to it. What is this church into which we are baptized? Is

(3) Ibid-Page 97

(4) Op. Cit.-Page 473



it merely the sum of all those people who have paid their dues, so to speak, by the act of baptism?

Though such a concept of the Church undoubtedly predominated during the Middle Ages, as is reflected in their baptismal theology and practice, Protestant Christianity has consistently maintained that baptism of itself does not make one a Christian. The church is not merely a human institution which one can take or leave as he wills, or which determines its own membership. Essentially the church is a divine, and not a human institution. Membership in the church depends upon one's relationship with God in Christ. Thus Aulen says:

"The Church cannot, therefore, be defined, as it were, from below on the basis of the individuals who belong to it. Such a sociological point of view which fixes certain human qualifications as prerequisites for the formation of the Church have lost sight of that which according to faith is the creative and constitutive factor of the Church as the creation of God. . . . Just as it is correct to say that baptism is an act of God through which he creates the Church and that we become members of the Church through baptism, so it is wrong to say that the Church is the sum total of all baptized. The Church is not the sum total of the believers, nor of the baptized. It is the dominion of Christ on earth and the fellowship created by the Spirit." (5)

In essence then, the church is the body of Christ on earth. It extends wherever his Spirit reaches into the hearts and lives of men. Its boundaries we cannot determine or know, for we can only judge outwardly, and cannot authoritatively nor definitely say that an





individual is or is not a member of Christ's body. In the words of Karl Barth:

" . . . where two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus they will mutually recognize and acknowledge that they are those who are gathered by Him as their one Lord, and regard and receive one another as brothers because they are all brothers of this First-begotten. Who really belongs to them? Who is awakened by the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, and therefore a saint, and as such a member of the communion of saints, a brother of those united with him in this fellowship? They all see and judge one another with human eyes and not with those of God. They do not see into the heart. They can only trust one another. And which of them looking even into his own heart, can give more than a human judgement that he himself is awakened by the Holy Spirit and a true member of the communion of saints, so that he belongs to this assembly? This, too, and above all, is something that we can know only in trust. The Christian community is built on the fact that this trust is permitted and commanded:" (6)

And so, Aulen says:

"Membership in the church rests on the call and election of God. The words of the Lord in the Gospel of John apply to the whole church: "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." (John 15:16) No one has received or can receive membership in the church in any other way." (7)

"Christian faith cannot, therefore, draw any boundaries around the church. About this problem of boundaries the Christian faith can say nothing more than that the church extends as far as the activity of Christ, the Spirit, and the Gospel reach, that the church of God is being established where the Spirit of Christ is active, and that because of this work of the Spirit the boundaries of the church are continually changing." (8)

Whatever we say concerning baptism, therefore, must be said in this light. We are not presuming to fence in

(6) Barth-Doctrine of Reconciliation-Volume II-Page 701

(7) Op. Cit.-Page 350

(8) Ibid-Page 344 (Aulen)





the Church of Christ. We have no desire to try to force, control, manipulate, or limit the Spirit of God. We must recognize that the Spirit no doubt extends beyond our human institutions, beyond those whom we recognize as human institutions, beyond those whom we recognize as being members via baptism. We must also be aware that there may be some baptized persons to whom the Spirit of Christ is alien, who may even rebel against or oppose our Lord.

Bearing in mind that the Spirit of God is free to act where He will and that he is not dependent upon human institutions nor ordinances, even though they do receive his approval, the body of Christ as a fellowship of believers, as followers of Christ must be a recognizable corporate body. Jesus himself chose twelve disciples to be with him and to continue after his death as a living fellowship and witness to himself. It is within the corporate body of Christ, the Church, that the Spirit of Christ lives among men and the mission of Christ is carried forward to the world. Therefore it is essential that there be a recognized Church, the boundaries of which are set, to witness to Christ and carry forth his mission on earth.

What then is the nature of this sociological institution which we call the Church? How can we define it in terms which will give the concept some definite limitations beyond which we might safely say heresay begins.



The Twentieth General Council adopted the following definition:

"According to the tradition in which we stand the Church is a community in which the Word is purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered. These activities are central. They both create and define the community and discipline which is the Church, because in and through them God acts." (9)

Within this church the faith of its members is strenthened, the dying of its members to sin and their growth in the Spirit of Christ is assisted, the implications of the Christian faith are realized, and the grace of Christ is exemplified. It is membership in this body which baptism signifies. This is not to say that the "visible" church is something other than the Body of Christ, but that we recognize the fact that it is not necessarily the whole body of Christ and that not all baptized members are in reality necessarily members of the Spiritual Body.

Of what value then is baptism? If one can be baptized and still not be reconciled to God, or if one can be reconciled to God without baptism, is baptism not a rather unnecessary ecclesiastical burden which the church might just as well put off its shoulders? Is it not an unnecessary demand which the church makes upon people who desire to become part of its fellowship or who have already experienced reconciliation in Christ?

After our consideration of the nature of baptism as a





means of the grace of God and its relation to the new life in Christ, the answer to these questions ought to be obvious. Just because baptism does not act irresistibly nor constitute an indelible mark on a person, does not mean that it has no value. Just because baptism does not necessarily make a person Christian, and need not indicate a truly reconciled Christian, does not mean that it should be abandoned. It can and does still have value as a means of grace. It can and does still signify the spiritual life in Christ which is taking place in one's life. It can and does still mark one's entry into the Christian Church. It can and does symbolize one's dying to sin and rising to a new life in Christ. Just because we cannot maintain that baptism magically transforms us, or automatically assures our salvation and membership in Christ's body does not mean that it is of no value.

John W. Meister's explanation of this point is as clear as any when he says:

"One as good as any may be the comparison of baptism with the oath of office taken by the President of the United States. The oath does not make him President--he has been duly elected by the people and his election has been confirmed by the proper government official. The oath does not confer the rights of the office--these have been conferred by the Constitution of the United States. The oath does not bestow upon him the abilities with which to perform the functions of the Presidency--these are the results of his native endowment, his environment, and his personal response to the two. Yet who would suggest that taking the oath of office is unimportant? Indeed it is necessary, for we would scarcely tolerate in the office a man who refused to take the oath publicly.



"It is something of this way with the act of baptism. Baptism does not make a person a Christian--he has been elected by God to this status before the foundation of the world, and his election has been confirmed in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism does not confer upon a person the rights of his new relationship with God--these have been conferred in the covenant made in Christ. And baptism does not bestow upon a person the abilities to fulfill his Christian commitment--these will result from the talents God gave him, his experiences in life and his response to the two. Yet who would suggest that baptism is unimportant? Indeed it is necessary--to fulfill the expectation of Christ and his saving community." (10)

One further comment in this connection may be valuable. To say that the Spirit of God extends, if He wills, beyond the boundaries of those baptized, does not mean that any one who refuses baptism is a member of the Body of Christ. With the exception of the Salvation Army and the Quakers who conscientiously reject the practice of baptism in any form, the majority of Christians accept gladly the privilege of being baptized. In other words, our doctrine of baptism must in no way limit God, but it is a privilege which ought to be desired by those who consider themselves Christians. Oscar Cullmann follows Barth's analogy of baptism with the conferring of the certificate of citizenship. (11) One can live in a country and not be a citizen of that country. But if the country is where he plans to spend the rest of his life, if he likes the country, he can hardly live there without

(10) John Meister-What Baptism Means-Pages 80,81

(11) Cullmann-Baptism in the New Testament-Page 38



desiring citizenship. To become a citizen changes his relationship, and gives him a sense of belonging which he could not otherwise have.

This analogy brings us to emphasize once again the fact that membership is not simply a human decision. It is Christ himself who confers membership in his Body, who graciously offers one his Spirit and reconciliation. It is the Church which receives the individual into its fellowship and offers a person baptism. Therefore, baptism is a sacrament of the church and cannot be understood apart from the Church. D.M. Baillie puts it this way:

"Well let us remember for one thing that the sacraments are not merely matters between the individual and God. They are sacraments of the Church, a visible society, and apart from their social and corporate aspect they cannot be understood at all." (12)

It is through the church, primarily, that God's Spirit is known and sustained in the life of the individual. It is within and through the fellowship of the church that the sacraments are operative. This is not to limit the freedom of the Spirit, but to say that baptism is baptism into the church as a sociological institution as well as a spiritual reality. G.P. Beasley-Murray puts the relationship very well in these words:

"True though it be that the Church calls men into the Koinenia of Christ and the Spirit; true though it be that the Church through its representatives baptizes the converts made, and thus that baptism





is properly a Church act: the power of baptism does not derive from the Church. Baptism is what it is through the operation of Christ by his Spirit. He works through his servants, but He gives the grace, He incorporates into the Body, He makes a believer to become a new creation. The only control over baptism that the Church or its representatives has is to grant it or withhold it, but its spiritual significance first and last is from the Lord." (13)

We must also emphasize the nature of baptism as a beginning. As was emphasized in the last chapter, it is not necessarily a beginning of one's spiritual life as such. One may be well along the road of faith, and have experienced a good deal of the new life in Christ prior to baptism. But it is the beginning of a new relationship to God and his church, it is the beginning of one's conscious witness as a member of the church, or in the case of infants, it signifies the beginning of God's grace in their lives through the church. Baptism is, in the words of Meister, "reserved for initiates into the faith." (14)

Finally, a word need be said regarding the responsibility which the sacrament of baptism places upon both the individual being baptized and upon the church. Though we must heed the abundant warning which theologians have voiced regarding the placing of prerequisites to baptism, there are post-requisites which must be recognized. In other words, though membership in the church rests on the call and election of God, and we, like Peter, might be profoundly surprised to discover what

(13) Beasley-Murray-Baptism in the New Testament-Page 280

(14) J.W. Meister-What Baptism Means-Page 96



"Gentiles" God calls, that call places the obligation of Christian discipleship upon the individual. And therefore, though the church has responsibility to extend to an individual the grace of God, it has also the responsibility to do all within its power to assist the baptized individual to grow in the Spirit and love of Christ. This obligation of love which the members of the church have to one another, ought not to be overlooked any more than the mission they have to the rest of the world. The strength of Christian fellowship has been lost to a great degree in the church today because of a false sense of individualism with regard to one's relationship with God. The upbuilding of one another in love and faith is one of the prime obligations of the baptized community, and, if necessary, so is the loving rebuke of one who offends Christian discipleship. Jesus' words as recorded in Matthew may not be irrelevant here:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church: and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." (15)

Paul echoes the same instructions in I Corinthians 6.

The primary responsibility, however, is not rebuke of the

(15) Matthew 18:15-17





brethen, but their upbuilding in the Spirit of Christ. The shole New Testament echoes this spirit which Paul voices in the words:

"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him. For Christ did not please himself;" (16)

If the church today would take more seriously this obligation toward its baptized members, what a stronger fellowship it would be--congregationally, denominationally, and inter-denominationally.

The newly baptized member takes upon himself the discipline and mission of the Christian disciple. He has the responsibility to fully share in the above mentioned fellowship of the church and to strive diligently for its peace and welfare. As a response of gratitude for the privilege of membership, he ought also to endeavor to grow in grace, to be more Christ-like, to put away the ways of sin so that he may share more fully the new life of the spirit in the church. This, of course, means doing all within one's power to live the kind of ethical life that will bring honor and glory to the name of Christ. (17)

This is not an obligation which one ought to indulge in grudgingly, like working without wages, but which ought to be a joy found nowhere else. For the Christian life is life abundant and full here on earth, and in the age to come, life eternal.

(16) Romans 15:1-3

(17) Romans 6:1-4



Therefore, in summation, baptism is not essential for membership in the body of Christ, though it is a significant and meaningful means by which God extends his grace to us and ought to be received with joy and gratitude. It is the means by which the church accepts individuals as being part of itself, proclaiming the grace of God to be extended to them, and invoking the Spirit of God in their lives. It is also the means by which the individual proclaims his acceptance of God's grace and his willingness to take upon himself the responsibility of Christian discipleship.



Chapter 8

Baptism of Infants and of Adults

Having dealt with the basic theological questions concerning the relation of baptism to such basic concepts of the Christian faith as grace, the new life in Christ (salvation) and the Christian Church, we must now turn our attention upon the more practical implications of our theological quest. The most immediate and presently controversial of these implications is the question, To whom is the sacrament of baptism rightly administered? Has the traditionally orthodox church been correct in administering baptism to infants and children of professing Christians, or is the Baptist tradition correct in refusing to do so, claiming that the sacrament of baptism is only rightly administered to "believers"?

The ecumenical atmosphere of the present day gives particular urgency to this question as churches of both practices have come to look sympathetically and critically not only upon the practices of the other but upon their own practices. This is undoubtedly a step in the right direction from the dominant policy of a more or less tolerant ignoring of one another, prevalent during the past four centuries.

Another factor has brought the controversy between baptism of infants and that of believers into focus at this time; that being the abuse of the practice of infant baptism, primarily, though not entirely, by nationalized





or established churches. Most European opponents of infant baptism have their most emotional and practical argument in what is to them the indiscriminate use of baptism by the established church. They point to the millions of baptized people who have no connection with the church or are openly antagonistic to Christianity. The question that is understandably raised is, What value or meaning can baptism have under these circumstances? It must be superstitious, hypocritical, or meaningless.

To a lesser, though none-the-less crucial degree, the same situation exists among many or most of the non-established churches which practice infant baptism. A large percentage, (how large varies with the denominations) of those baptized completely reject the church in their adult years. What purpose or meaning can baptism have under these circumstances? Are we justified in continuing such a practice?

One hesitates to attack this problem, not only because of its complexity, but because to take a firm stand on either side does far more to manifest one's bias than it does to persuade others of one's convictions or add anything significant to the debate. However, the theological quest which has been thus far pursued binds us to draw some definite, if not new or revolutionary, conclusions.

Before beginning any discussion let me clarify that by infant baptism I mean the baptism of those too young to



take any baptismal vows on their own behalf. Any discussion of the difference between the baptism of infants and children seems to me to be fruitless. The only significant question is the question of whether baptism is properly administered to those who are not mature enough to profess their sin and their faith and take their vows, or ought rather to be reserved for those who are. The question of where we draw the line is another question and will be given further consideration later.

The first emphasis which needs to be made on the question is the fact that the essential nature of baptism must remain the same whether it be administered to infants or adults, or it ceases to be baptism. Suggestions to the contrary have been made, but cannot be taken too seriously. Baptism as a sacrament can be and mean only one thing, whether it be administered to infants, or adults, or both. The significant question before us in this regard is not whether there is room for both infant baptism and adult or believer' baptism, but whether or not the Christian sacrament of baptism is rightly administered to infants, or adults, or both. For this reason I have worded the title of this chapter as I have, and though I will for convenience use the terms "infant baptism" and "adult" or "believers' baptism" I do not mean to infer any difference in the essential character of baptism, but only in the age





and maturity of the person being baptized.

Part of the problem to clarity in this regard is the integral complexity of the issues involved. When we speak of infant baptism, we usually mean to imply (or take for granted) that it is baptism by sprinkling. When we speak of believer' baptism we usually imply by immersion. As a result we are trying to attack two problems at once and imply that they are in truth only one question. Therefore, most of the discussion regarding this question has considered the two alternatives (infant baptism by sprinkling and believers' baptism by immersion) but have not at all considered the possibility of immersing a child or sprinkling an adult. In reality some churches do practice the immersion of children while others, including the United Church of Canada, practice the sprinkling of adults. These two quite different problems regarding baptism I hope to separate. Therefore, in this chapter, consideration is not being given to the "how" of baptism, but only to the "when."

With these preliminary observations in mind let us proceed to the question, Was baptism administered to infants in the Apostolic church? The answer to this question is shrouded in a good deal of uncertainty, allowing for one to manifest his bias by answering either yes or no. Jeachim Jeremias puts forth probably the strongest, most



scholastically sound, and the most influential argument for the practice of infant baptism in the primitive church.

Jeremias reasons that the baptism of whole households as recorded in Acts, provides strong though admittedly not conclusive evidence in favor of infant baptism. He says:

"This does not mean to say that in every particular case in which the baptism of 'a whole household' is mentioned, small children were actually present. But it does mean that Paul and Luke could under no circumstances have applied the oikos formula, if they had wished to say that only adults had been baptized." (1)

He also points out the "family solidarity" of the ancient world, using Acts 16: 30-34 as a prime example. On the strength of such considerations as this portion of Scripture affords he says:

"If the father of the household became a Christian, the family followed him, not indeed always, but usually." (2)

He goes on to add as an explanation for the lack of evidence in Scripture for infant baptism:

"The way in which the solidarity of the family was taken for granted explains further why no reason was found for emphasizing or justifying especially the baptism of children." (3)

Adding also the consideration of the eschatological nature of the primitive Kerygma and therefore baptism, he concludes:

"The children were not regarded by the primitive church as isolated units; the household was regarded as a unity in the sight of God. The

(1) Jeremias-Pages 21-22

(2) Jeremias-Page 22

(3) Jeremias-Page 23



faith of the father who represents the household and the faith of the mother embraces also the children." (4)

In addition to this, Jeremias compares primitive Christian baptism and Jewish proselyte baptism and finds enough similarities to make him conclude that since Jewish Proselyte baptism included children, so must the earliest Christian baptism. He goes on to spend one chapter on the question of the baptism of children born to Christian parents in the earliest period. He concludes that:

"in Rome at the time when the Gospel of Mark was written the children of Christian parents were baptized." (5)

Oscar Cullmann agrees almost entirely with Jeremias, taking the position previously held by Jeremias (6) that baptism of children born to Christian parents is not well founded. He concludes his book as follows:

"From these final conclusions, both adult and infant Baptism are to be regarded as equally biblical. I began this work in the belief that I should reach this unqualified conclusion. But I end the examination by adding a restriction: the Baptism of children, whose parents at their birth were already believing Christians, is not demonstrable. Moreover, a postponement of Baptism of this kind is incongruous with the New Testament presupposition, according to which, in this special case, it is not previous personal decision of faith (as in the case of proselyte heathen and Jews) but natural birth within the Church that is to be regarded as the sign of the divine will to salvation and consequently as claim to reception into the fellowship of Christ." (7)

(4) Jeremias-Pages 23-24

(5) Jeremias-Page 55

(6) Ibid-Page 47

(7) Cullmann-Baptism in the New Testament-Page 70





Beasley-Murray opposes the thesis of these two men right down the line. Taking as an example the baptism of all the household of Cornelius, he points to Peter's explanation of the reason for his actions as given in Acts 11:15-17:

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?".

Beasley-Murray goes on to say that it was on the basis of the reception of the Holy Spirit that whole households were baptized, and this would exclude the children. He goes on to make the point that it was on the basis of belief that people were baptized in the earliest church by interpreting Acts 16:31:

"Believe, and thou shalt be saved; and the same of thy household.' That is why the word of the Lord was spoken to 'all who were in his house.'" (v. 32), namely that all might hear and all might believe along with him. The process is the same as that which happened to Crispus and his family: 'Crispus believed on the Lord with his whole house'; he did not believe for them, but they shared his faith with him. Such is the common pattern in Acts: the Gospel calls for faith, and both come to expression in baptism." (8)

Beasley-Murray opposes the concept of the solidarity of the family on the basis of I Corinthians 7:12 ff. He also states that any evidence of such family solidarity which may be found in the Old Testament has no weight because it precedes the later development of personal



religion which Jesus advocates. Finding no evidence for infant baptism in the New Testament he concludes that:

"infant baptism originated in a capitulation of pressures exerted upon the church both from without and from within." (9)

Without going into any more detail regarding these two points of view some conclusions can be reached. First of all we must admit that here we are in the area of uncertainty. The fact that there is no direct and concrete evidence of infant baptism in the New Testament is admitted by all. When we move to the realm of probable and possible uncertainties, there is room for various interpretations depending upon which point of view one wishes to uphold or emphasize.

However, some uncertainties are more probable than others, and give evidence of a less strained interpretation. If I must make a decision between the two, I am convinced that Jeremias comes closer to the truth than does Beasley-Murray. On the basis of the observations of chapter three and those of Jeremias and Cullmann we have fairly conclusive evidence that the presence of the Holy Spirit and mature faith were not the only bases of the earliest Christian baptism. Quite probably the practice of infant baptism reaches back to the very beginning of the Church's history, though finally conclusive evidence on the subject will likely never be available.

(9) Beasley-Murray-Page 352





Lacking such conclusive historical evidence, are we justified then in maintaining the practice of infant baptism? One might just as well turn the question around and ask, Are we justified in discontinuing the practice which has been the policy of the church at least since the second century? Since neither point of view can be conclusively proven or disproven historically, at least at the present time, we must turn to a different approach to the question. This approach must be made on the basis of the nature of the sacrament as such, with an evaluation of the age at which it is most rightly administered.

On this basis we must draw attention to the nature of the sacrament of baptism which was discussed in previous chapters. As a sacrament, baptism is a means by which God may impart his grace to men. This does not mean that he necessarily does so, but that it may be one means by which he reveals his love and grace to an individual. As was mentioned, baptism may be a means of grace not only for the person or persons being baptized, but for any one or all of the worshipping congregation. For the sacrament of baptism is an act of worship in which the whole assembled body of worshippers participates. These not participating in the act of baptism as such are not merely onlookers, but participants in this act of worship, for they are receiving another member into their holy fellowship, and may very well experience again the grace of God offered



to themselves as they see it offered to another. In other words, baptism embodies the gospel of God's loving grace being offered to sinful humanity. Is this any less meaningful when administered to infants than it is to adults who have already experienced enough of that grace to come of their own will to baptism? No, indeed! It is no doubt more meaningful as the embodiment of the prevenient love of God when administered to children. Aulen puts it this way:

"Since infant baptism, therefore, gives most emphatic expression to the prevenient grace of God and consequently appears as the principal form of baptism, there can be no reasonable objection to its validity. The question whether infant baptism occurs in the New Testament is of relatively minor importance. There is nothing that actually contravenes, but much that clearly indicates that infant baptism belonged to the practice of primitive Christianity. The decisive element is that infant baptism is consonant with the whole spirit of the Gospel, as this spirit is revealed especially in Juses' own treatment of the children in Mark 10: 13-16." (10)

From this point of view, infant baptism is by no means a "capitulation to pressures exerted upon the church" from within or from without, but a natural expression of the prevenient love of God made available even to children. Again to quote Aulen:

"the value of baptism as the means of grace that establishes the church can be fully appreciated only when baptism occurs in the form of baptism of infants. Infant baptism is from the point of view of faith far from a secondary or less worthy



form; it is on the contrary its highest, purest, and most perfect form, that form in which its inner meaning is most clearly apparent ----- Even if baptism was not originally infant baptism, it does not mean that the latter is a degeneration from a higher form. It means rather that the necessary congregational conditions were not yet present which would make it possible for baptism to develop its fundamental connotations in the form of infant baptism." (11)

Secondly we must consider the nature of baptism in relation to the new life in Christ. As was maintained, the Christian life is a lifelong process of growing and maturing in the Spirit of Christ which can begin very early in the life of a child of Christian parents and continues until death. Admittedly it is not a life of continual progress, there are times in all our lives of sin and selfishness for which we must seek forgiveness and times of renewed and deepened dedication. The question which we must ask in this regard is, at what point along this spiritual road is baptism most rightly administered?

Baptists and other churches practicing only adult baptism, maintain that baptism is properly administered only after a conviction of sin, and faith can be testified to by the person being baptized. In the words of Beasley-Murray:

"When assent is given to sin by the individual, so that in some measure he too sins 'after the likeness of Adam's transgression,' then sin is both personal and culpable; only the cry of repentance and faith towards Christ can then bring the deliverance from the sin which slays. (Romans 7:11). At that point Christian baptism becomes meaningful." (12)

(11) Ibid-Page 381

(12) Op. Cit.-Page 367





Meaningful as what? Meaningful as signifying that at one point in his life the individual has known the pangs of guilt and sought in faith the grace of God? This does not make the sacrament of baptism any more meaningful nor its significance any more sure. Indeed to look at baptism from this point of view is to give it more the significance of the sacrament of penance in the Medieval and Roman church. It ought to be repeatable!

What would be a humorous comment if it were not so serious is made by John Wesley as he reports his observations in this regard:

"Of the adults I have known baptized lately, one only was at that time born again, in the full sense of the word; that is, found a thorough, inward change, by the love of God filling her heart. Most of them were only born again in a lower sense; that is, received remission of their sins. And some (as it has since too plainly appeared) neither in one sense nor the other." (13)

In this respect, the Baptists prefer to have a dedication of children as children and withhold the sacrament until after Christian repentance and faith are evident. From this discussion of the nature of the sacrament, it seems better to have the sacrament of baptism during infancy or childhood (for children of Christian parents) and the confirmation later in life. For as has been stated, baptism, whether it be administered in childhood or adulthood, does not make us Christian.

(13) Wesley's Works-Volume 1-Pages 172-3



This is a spiritual reality which depends upon the grace of God as appropriated through faith. It is not more, but less, meaningful to postpone the sacrament embodying the spiritual reality until later in life, than it is to administer it during childhood which is really the beginning of the activity of God's grace in the life of the child raised in a Christian home.

Admittedly the child can repudiate his baptism in later years, but so can the person baptized as an adult. Whether baptized as children or as adults, individuals can later deny their previous faith or simply through negligence of spiritual things drift away from the grace and faith exemplified in their baptism. The words of John Wesley apply as well to those baptized as adults as they do to those baptized as children:

"Say not then in your heart, 'I was once baptized, therefore I am now a child of God.' Alas, that consequence will by no means hold. How many are the baptized gluttons and drunkards, the baptized liars and common swearers, the baptized railers and evil speakers, the baptized whoremongers, thieves, extortioners? What think you? Are these now the children of God? Verily, I say unto whosoever you are, unto whom any one of the preceding characters belong, 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the works of your father ye do.'" (14).

Concerning baptism and church membership there is a good deal of uncertainty, not to say confusion with regard to the status of the baptized child. At this point, adult baptism is in practice at least the sacrament of entry into the church in a way that infant baptism is not.

Adult baptism automatically entitles the individual to





full membership in the church with all its privileges and responsibilities. The Greek Orthodox Church is the best example of a church which recognizes the full membership of the child, not only allowing, but intending the baptized children to receive the Eucharist or Holy Communion. The majority of Protestant churches, the Anglican church and the Roman Catholic church under ordinary conditions do not allow (or at least do not encourage) children to receive Holy Communion until after confirmation.

This practice indicates an uncertainty with regard to the relationship of the baptized child to the church. If baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the church, as has been maintained, then why does the child not have the privilege of partaking of Holy Communion? Is the Greek Orthodox Church being more consistent at this point by assuming the children are just as fully entitled to Holy Communion as the adults? Or is the membership of the child inferior to that of the adult?

While the Greek Orthodox and the Baptist positions at this point are by far the simpler and seemingly less contradictory, neither one is the general practice of the majority of Christendom. So we must ask the question, what is the basis of the orthodox practice of withholding Holy Communion until after confirmation? And secondly we must ask, is it a justifiable practice?

Regarding the basis of this practice, it is generally



accepted that though baptized children are actually members of the church in good standing, participation in the Lord's Supper is reserved for those of mature faith and understanding. The twentieth General Council of the United Church of Canada adopted the following statement:

"But baptism, whether adult or infant, looks forward to a growth in grace, and one way in which a baptized child can grow in grace and 'improve his baptism' is to profess for himself, when he comes of an age to do so, his faith in the Lord Jesus. Provision is made for such public profession in the rite of confirmation and reception to full communion. The separation of infant baptism from confirmation and first communion will be discussed later, but it must be said now that it does not imply any incompleteness in infant baptism. Whether one is baptized as an infant or as an adult one is brought into the life of the community of which Jesus Christ is the head. One is made a member of that community which is his body. One does not 'join the Church' at confirmation, one is made a member in baptism. This is true both for infants and adults." (15)

The next question which must be answered in this regard, then, is, Why is the Sacrament of baptism extended to children, but the sacrament of Holy Communion withheld until after confirmation? Does this not reflect an inconsistency in our doctrine of the sacraments?

The only answer to this question must be found in the difference in the nature of the two sacraments. Baptism, as has been maintained is the sacrament of initiation and comes properly at the beginning of one's membership in the



church. Holy Communion is the sacrament of maturity, when confession of sin, the rededication of one's life to Christ, and renewal of the acceptance of God's grace into one's life become meaningful. It is at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that the requirements which the most ardent supporters of adult baptism require of baptism become meaningful and necessary. On this basis the majority of churches are quite justified in withholding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper until after confirmation at the age of discretion. On this basis the twentieth General Council adopted the statement:

" . . . . we believe that the practice of admitting to Holy Communion only those who have been baptized and confirmed is a good one, and that the sequence baptism--confirmation--first communion should be maintained in the Church." (16)

One basic assumption underlying all considerations of infant baptism is the care with which it is administered. As I have said briefly before, the critics of infant baptism have a strong and justified criticism when they point to the millions of baptized non-christians we have in Western Christendom. While this criticism applies most appropriately to the established or state churches, it is one which other denominations must take seriously as well. To keep the sacrament of baptism from degenerating into superstition or meaninglessness (or should we say to raise

(16) Ibid-Page 484





it from these degenerate positions) it must be administered with more care.

At this point, the best policy of the church would seem to be to insist that at least one parent be a member of the church. Any relaxation at this point leaves the door open for such irresponsible baptisms as we presently know.

Two major objections are often raised at this point. First, that by insisting on the membership of the parents we are merely adding another legalistic ritual which the parents must perform in order to have their children baptized. But surely the church will not try to guard an irresponsible use of baptism by irresponsibly receiving members without first requiring sufficient instruction to make the membership vows meaningful. It is at both of these points that it seems the United Church of Canada has been too lax for meaningful membership and baptism.

The second objection to insisting upon the membership of the parents is the feeling that by so doing we are depriving the child because of the neglect of the parents. Some conscientious advocates of this position cite Mark 10: 13-16, which is used as a basis of baptism, and say that by refusing baptism we are like the disciples who would callously keep the children from Jesus when he has requested us to let the children come to him unhindered. In this regard, what the Twentieth General Council says of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper applies equally as



well to baptism:

"It is sometimes suggested that to exclude children from the Lord's Supper is to deprive them of a most meaningful opportunity to grow in grace. It is not always as clearly seen that uninformed inclusiveness may be a much more serious kind of deprivation." (17)

To refuse baptism of a child whose parents are not members of the church is not to prevent him from coming to Christ. He may just as freely participate in worship, Sunday School, and any other church activities helpful for his Christian maturity and be baptized as an adult when he comes of the age of discretion. As has been stated, baptism does not make one a Christian, nor insure membership in Christ's Spiritual fellowship. Neither does lack of baptism as an infant hinder the child from coming to Christ. Indeed it may facilitate it by removing any apathetic sense of belonging. Though the refusal of baptism which has been associated with hindering little children from coming to Jesus has great sentimental power, it is theologically indefensible.

Therefore, as a denomination, I believe the United Church of Canada should give ear to those who criticize what they consider to be indiscriminate baptism and restrict baptism of infants to those at least one of whose parents is a member of the church. To state that such is desirable without making it mandatory is giving rise to inconsistency of practice, confusion of understanding, and leaving the





burden of responsibility too much on the local minister and session.

The church not only has responsibility to administer the sacrament of baptism with care, whether it be to adults or children, it also has responsibility toward its baptized members. Be it sufficient at this time to emphasize once again the obligations of the church considered in the last chapter. The responsibility of the church for the support and nurture of the individual does not end, but in a real sense only begins, when it administers the sacrament of baptism.

Finally, one word ought to be said regarding sponsors or godparents. As the twentieth General Council maintained, except in the case of orphans, the parents ought to be the "sponsors" of the children. It is to the parents that the child looks for its spiritual and moral values and practices regardless of who may have "sponsored" him at baptism. The whole concept of sponsors as a substitute for parental sponsorship (as in the case of parents not being members of the church) belongs to an age and theology of the church completely foreign to that maintained in this thesis and by the United Church of Canada.

It is not only a practical impossibility, but an unchristian abrogation of parental rights for persons outside the immediate family to take the responsibility upon themselves to bring up a child in the knowledge and



love of God. No child is going to ignore or overlook the example and teaching of his parents with regard to religion and accept that of an outside sponsor. If the parents are not members of the church, or are not willing to accept the baptismal vows, better the child not be baptized until he comes of his own will, for this is just the type of "indiscriminate" baptism which has previously been criticized.

The concept of a "sponsor" as one who personally supports the parents in their baptismal vows and who undertakes the responsibility for the Christian nurture of the child along with the parents or in the parent's stead should they be prevented from doing so (as in the case of the death of the parents) has some merit. It must be recognized that such "sponsorship" is the unqualified responsibility of the whole church as represented by the local congregation. However, as the responsibility of all usually in practice becomes the personal responsibility of none, there is merit in the focusing of the responsibility of "sponsorship" upon one individual or couple. To do so, however, does not relieve the remainder of the congregation (or church) of their Christian duty to also support the child and his parents in the child's Christian nurture and growth. In this sense of the term the congregation ought to see itself as the sponsor of every baptized child.



Chapter 9

The Significance of the Method of Baptism

The final consideration of this treatment of Christian baptism is that of the method of baptism. There are those who are quite as insistent upon immersion as the only proper method of baptism as they are that only those of mature years should be baptized. There are some even more radical who insist that according to the New Testament no other method is permissible and that baptism by immersion is the only effective or acceptable way to baptize. Such insistence is no doubt due to the influence which Paul's use of analogy with the death and resurrection of Christ has had on Christian thought. It ought not, however, to blind our eyes to the fact that baptism by immersion is not the only method which has New Testament basis or adequate significance as Christian baptism.

Once again, at the risk of monotonous repetition, emphasis must be made of the fact that God is not tied to any one form. This observation Christian history will easily substantiate. Any attempt to tie God to a sacramental form is done at the expense of the Christian concept of God. However, it is beneficial to consider the significance of the two predominant methods of baptism to determine which of them is most significant as Christian baptism.

Considering the New Testament evidence, there is no doubt that baptism by immersion was very common or Paul would not have drawn his illustrative analogy from it.





To say that baptism by immersion is the only method of baptism recognized in the New Testament, however, does not take into consideration some very significant facts which have long been recognized. John Wesley, in his Treatise On Baptism says:

"Baptism is performed by washing, dipping, or sprinkling the person, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who is hereby devoted to the ever-blessed Trinity. I say, by washing, dipping, or sprinkling; because it is not determined in Scripture in which of these ways it shall be done, neither by any express precept, nor by any such example as clearly proves it; nor by the force or meaning of the word baptize." (1)

"That there is no express precept, all calm men allow," says Wesley. And he goes on to point out that because of Paul's analogy of dying and rising again we assume that this is the way in which all men were baptized, but there is no evidence to support this assumption. Even the example of the eunuch baptized by Philip does not necessarily imply that he was immersed; the going "down into the water" quite obviously only refers to going from the chariot into the water. How Philip baptized him is not stated.

Other considerations, such as Paul baptizing the jailor and his household in the middle of the night and the baptism of the three thousand in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost lead to doubts about their baptism by immersion.

When we consider the meaning of the Greek word "to baptize" we find that its primary meaning is indeed to immerse. However, it is evident from the usage of the

(1) Wesley's Works-Volume 10-Page 188



word in the New Testament that it did not always signify literal immersion into water or any other substance. Examples of this latter observation are:

(1) "I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. . . . ." (I Corinthians 10:1,2).

(2) "But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' . . . . ." (Mark 10:38).

(3) "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and I am constrained until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50).

Therefore, we are forced to conclude with John Wesley that:

"To sum up all, the manner of baptizing (whether by dipping or sprinkling) is not determined in Scripture. There is no example from which we can conclude for dipping rather than sprinkling. There are probable examples of both; and both are equally contained in the natural meaning of the word." (2)

Donald Baillie puts the case in these words:

"It is undoubtedly true that the New Testament makes a great deal of the connection between baptism and Jesus' death and resurrection, and uses the symbolism of the descent into the water and then the emergence as signifying our dying to sin and rising with a new life in Christ. But the death and resurrection motif is by no means the only one pursued in the New Testament in its explication of the meaning of Christian baptism. Though it is very important, it is among others. Another is the motif of cleansing which includes both forgiveness of past sin and liberation from the corruption of sin; and of this a sprinkling or pouring would be sufficient symbol, inherited from the Old Testament: 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.' Yet another motif in the New Testament understanding of





baptism is that of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit--perhaps indeed this is the most central of all. And this is symbolized even better by a sprinkling of water than by an immersion." (3)

And so in baptism, we have at least three dominant spiritual realities being portrayed or symbolized:

(1) The dying to sin and rising to a new life in Christ,

(2) The spiritual cleansing or washing away of sin; i.e. forgiveness,

(3) The descent of the Holy Spirit--baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The first is symbolized best by immersion, the last by sprinkling or pouring, and the second is symbolized equally well by either immersion or sprinkling. The fact that Paul has found in the one motif an apt illustration for his theological and ethical teaching ought not to blind us to the significance of the other two.

Donald Baillie carries this consideration further with the following important observation:

"When we think the matter out theologically, we see that the dying and rising with Christ, and the cleansing, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are not three separate realities at all, but aspects of the same reality. They are all aspects of the newness, the renewal, of which baptism speaks sacramentally to us; a new life, a new and clean conscience, a fresh start, a new heart, a new spirit." (4)

(3) Baillie--Theology of the Sacraments-Page 78-9

(4) Ibid-Page 79



How, then, do we make our choice between the two methods of baptism? It seems that in reality we are free to take our choice, as the church has seen fit to do throughout history. It is interesting to note Lappin's observations at this point:

"Indeed it is not at all certain that baptism by immersion was generally practiced among Baptists before 1641. None of the Confessions of Faith issued by Baptists before that published by the English Baptists in 1644 makes any explicit mention of baptism by immersion, and there is evidence to warrant in belief that the pioneers of the Baptist Movement did not practice immersion." (5)

He goes on to explain the Baptist's later insistence on immersion as follows:

"It was bound to follow as a result of closer study of the Scriptures and their keen desire to be strictly Scriptural in their practice." (6)

As has been shown, this explanation likely reflects a somewhat prejudiced interpretation of Scripture, and such a claim to the superiority of immersion can hardly be upheld.

John Wesley's practice in these matters seems worthy of note. He records in his diary his refusal to baptize a child whose parents would not consent to immersion, (7) but he did baptize even adults by pouring or sprinkling. (8) We might conclude from the former case that their refusal of immersion indicated a lack of real Christian conviction

(5) Lappin--Baptists in the Protestant Tradition-Page 65

(6) Ibid-Page 65

(7) Op. Cit.-Volume 1-Pages 30-31

(8) Ibid-Volume 2-Page 469



which was basis enough for refusal of baptism. Though Wesley, like Luther, preferred baptism by immersion, it is evident that he did not dogmatically insist upon it.

The practical consideration of one's proximity to adequate amount of water for immersion is likely one of the primary reasons for the predominance of the sprinkling method, while the predominance of the concept of immersion both in the New Testament and in the meaning of the Greek word "to Baptize" has been the primary reason for the continued practice of immersion. The psychological effect of immersion, especially for adults, is one which ought not be overlooked.

The important consideration for us to keep in mind, which ever method of baptism we prefer, is charity for those who conscientiously practice the opposite method. So long as the Christian Church allows such secondary matters as the method of baptism to divide it from Christian unity and fellowship, we have not progressed very far from the Priestly and Pharisaic debates of Judaism of Jesus' day. Woe unto us, when we meet him who has called us to love one another as he has loved us. Our righteousness will hardly have exceeded that of the Scribes and Pharisees.





Conclusion

In summary, from the light of this study, we can see how far the theology of Christian baptism has developed from its early primitive and superstitious beginnings in the dusky dawn of history to the present. Its historical road in both theology and practice has been at times mountainous and difficult; at times uncertain. It is a road that has had its attractive detours into superstition and determinism. But it unquestionably has been one of the very prominent concepts exerting a considerable influence upon the course of Christian history.

So far as I am concerned, the theology and practice of baptism has sufficiently definite historical foundation in the New Testament to assure our Lord's approval and expressed intent for its use in his church, though he may never have baptized anyone himself. Although we would all wish for more explicit New Testament teaching on the matter we must make the best use of what we have. From the consideration of the available evidence as I have presented it, my conviction is that the lack of explicit New Testament teaching on the subject is due largely to popular acceptance and understanding of the baptismal doctrine so that it was not a pressing issue or problem at that time. If the New Testament authors had been thinking in terms of setting guideposts for the church and its problems for twenty centuries into the future, I am sure they would have been more explicit about many issues about which they were



relatively silent.

As the doctrine of Christian baptism has been hammered out on the anvil of history and forged in the fires of experience and debate, it has reflected the course of general theology. The wide variety of baptismal theology and practice throughout the course of Christian history has reflected the constantly changing contemporary thought of many other areas of Christian theology. Inferior doctrines of baptism accompany inferior theologies of God, of the nature of a sacrament, of forgiveness and grace, and of the nature of the mission of the church. It is only in the context of the whole of Christian theology at any given time in history that we can fully understand the doctrine and practice of Christian baptism. One cannot isolate a theology of baptism at any point in history and understand it apart from its relationship with the whole of Christian thought at that time.

In the ecumenical church of today, when more attention is being given the theology of baptism in the hope of overcoming differences of theology and practice, it has become one of the focal points around which the whole theology of the church is being reshaped and redeveloped. As a result the study of the doctrine of Christian baptism has become one of the important contemporary studies. It is my conviction that as differing church traditions come





to mutually understand and appreciate one another the theology of all will grow in depth and maturity. We must diligently and fairly consider the merits and weaknesses of our varying doctrines with a view to developing a doctrine of Christian baptism which adequately appreciates the values, insights, and truth contained in each.

This I have attempted to do as an individual. The basic necessity of an adequate doctrine of Christian baptism, it seems to me, is to retain its wealth of sacramental value while at the same time avoiding the dangers of superstition. We must not tie God's hands to a human act of worship; nor must we say that it is unimportant as a means of grace. We must beware not to tie the lifelong pilgrimage of the spiritual life in the membership of God's church too closely to the single act of baptism; nor must we dissociate the two as though they were independent of one another. In short we must be broad-minded enough to recognize and incorporate the aspects of truth which the various traditions have often so ardently maintained and championed exclusively. At the same time we must be careful not to relinquish the hard-won truths held by these traditions.

With regard to the debate between the supporters of infant baptism and those of adult baptism, I believe we



must recognize the historical and theological validity of both sides. We ought not to insist dogmatically on either one or the other. In the fellowship of the church there ought to be room for both practices in a spirit of mutual respect and love. Where certain requirements of membership of the parents are met, I believe baptism of infants to be the more meaningful practice. However, I have no hesitation in advising, if not insisting, that without satisfactory family conditions baptism be delayed until the child is mature enough to take the baptismal vows on his own behalf.

Concerning the practice of baptism by sprinkling or pouring as opposed to immersion I think also that there is legitimate basis for both practices. To insist upon one method to the exclusion of the other is to place undue significance upon ritual, especially when concrete New Testament evidence to support immersion to the exclusion of sprinkling is inconclusive. Although New Testament evidence is in favor of immersion, and it is possibly the preferred form especially for adults, baptism by sprinkling can be just as significant and meaningful. When practiced sincerely I do not think that one's spiritual life will be either greatly enhanced or hindered by the method used in baptism. Nor do I think that God is as concerned about such procedures as he is about the spiritual health of



those who place undue emphasis on them.

Therefore, in conclusion, it is my hope that the Christian church will maintain the variety of practice which it now exemplifies, but that it will develop a sense of love and respect for those who differ in their practice. I do not advocate this on the basis of a lack of concern for nor commitment to the Christian faith, but on the basis of an informed theological appreciation of the validity and the vitality of such variety. If this can be achieved, the church will have gone a long way toward unity, and I believe toward God's purpose for it.







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